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WMD, WMD, WMD: Securitization through Ritualized Incantation of Ambiguous Phrases

Ole Wæver's conceptualization of security as a speech act was one of the most innovative theoretical developments in security studies in recent decades. Drawing upon John Austin's concept of 'illocutionary' acts—the 'performance of an act *in* saying something'—Wæver argued that 'security' should not be understood 'as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance ["security"] *itself* is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship).'¹ From this perspective, when government officials pronounce something an existential threat, their pronouncements are to be interpreted as performing the threat, successfully or unsuccessfully, rather than as truly or falsely describing a preexisting danger. Consider, for example, the seemingly descriptive claim 'Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.' Whereas standard approaches to security would assess this claim in terms of its correspondence to Iraqi reality, Wæver's securitization theory directs us to analyze how the uttering of the claim may itself have constructed a reality of an Iraqi threat.

The most striking feature of Wæver's formulation is the instantaneity of securitization: saying 'security' is not the first stage of a social process that culminates in a condition of emergency requiring special measures (that is, securitization); rather, the uttering of 'security' and the production of an emergency condition blend into a single 'event'.² Alas, as Stritzel and McDonald observed, when Wæver subsequently joined forces with Barry Buzan to create a 'new framework for analysis', the resulting book—the primary text of the 'Copenhagen School'—displayed a marked tension between securitization understood as a linguistic event and

¹ John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, 2nd edition, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 99, emphasis in original; Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', in Ronnie Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 55, emphasis in original.

² Holger Stritzel, 'Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:3 (2007), p. 359.

securitization *qua* social process.³ While the ‘new framework’ echoed Wæver’s conceptualization of securitization as an illocutionary act, the text at the same time characterized securitization as a ‘process’ that apparently consists of two stages.⁴ First, a ‘securitizing actor’ offers ‘an argument about the priority and urgency of an existential threat’; ‘then’, a ‘significant audience’ comes to ‘accept’, or becomes ‘convinced’ by, the argument.⁵ Rather than evoke the logic of illocution—acting ‘*in* saying something’—this two step formula brings to mind what Austin called a ‘perlocutionary’ act—acting ‘*by* saying something, such as convincing’ or ‘saying something [that] produces certain *consequential effects* upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience’.⁶

While the watering down of the illocutionary character of securitization in ‘A New Framework for Analysis’ was probably unintended,⁷ subsequent scholarship on securitization has made a deliberate ‘move toward a more processual understanding of security . . . as well as [toward] non-linguistic’ approaches.⁸ For example, Bigo argued that the issue of immigration has become securitized not only through successful speech acts but also through the routinized

³ Ibid.; Matt McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:4 (2008), pp. 563–87; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

⁴ Buzan et al., ‘Security’, p. 26 (‘securitization’ as an illocutionary act); pp. 5, 26, 30, 37 (‘process’). As Stritzel put it, ‘Wæver and Buzan continuously fluctuate between the terms *process* and *speech act/utterance* as if both were synonymous’—see Stritzel, ‘Towards a Theory of Securitization’, p. 364, emphasis in original.

⁵ Buzan et al., Ibid., p. 25 (‘argument’); p. 204 (‘then’); pp. 27, 37 (‘significant audience’); pp. 25, 27, 31, 34, 41 (‘accept’); p. 41 (‘convinced’). In the words of McDonald, Buzan et al. ‘began to place increased emphasis on the role of constituencies or audiences in ‘backing up’ speech acts. . . . Here, speech acts were defined as ‘securitizing moves’ that became securitizations through audience consent’—see ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’, p. 566.

⁶ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 99, emphasis in original; p. 109, emphasis in original; p. 101, emphasis added.

⁷ As Stritzel pointed out, Wæver continued to champion theorizing securitization as a linguistic ‘event’—see Stritzel, ‘Towards a Theory of Securitization’, p. 360.

⁸ Scott D. Watson, ‘“Framing” the Copenhagen School: Integrating the Literature on Threat Construction’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40:2 (2012), p. 19.

performance by ‘security professionals’ of a ‘range of administrative practices such as population profiling’.⁹ Balzacq ‘reject(ed) . . . [the] position that securitization is a speech act’ in favor of the position that securitization is shaped by ‘context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction.’¹⁰ Stritzel elaborated an understanding of securitization that is ‘less linguistic and more social/structural’ than Wæver’s.¹¹ McDonald likewise called for a conceptual framework that would go ‘beyond speech’ and ‘beyond the speech act’.¹² Watson argued that securitization research ‘should be viewed as a subfield’ of the literature on the ‘framing’ of security threats notwithstanding that literature’s largely ‘objectivist understanding of reality’.¹³ Finally, several scholars have questioned ‘whether a theory so closely tied to *speech* . . . is capable of addressing the dynamics of security in a world where political communication is increasingly bound with *images*’.¹⁴ In this vein, Hansen developed an innovative interpretation of ‘securitizations that run through the visual rather than the linguistic’.¹⁵

In this essay, we want to push back against the retreat from a speech act-centered understanding of securitization. It is not that we reject the criticisms articulated by the scholars who champion more process-oriented and/or non-linguistic approaches to securitization. We share their concerns that the Copenhagen School has ‘undertheorized’ the role of the audience

⁹ Didier Bigo, ‘Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease’, *Alternatives*, 27:1 (2002), p. 65.

¹⁰ Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience, and Context’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 176, 172.

¹¹ Stritzel, ‘Towards a Theory of Securitization’, p. 373.

¹² McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’, pp. 568, 570.

¹³ Watson, ‘Framing’, pp. 1, 13.

¹⁴ Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 47:4 (2003), p. 524, emphases in original. See also McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’, p. 569, and Watson, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Lene Hansen, ‘Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2011), p. 53.

and that the Copenhagen School ‘would need a clearer and more elaborated theory of the securitizing *act*’, a theory that would ‘say more about the relative status of the idea of a security *utterance* or speech act *event* as opposed to the idea of an *intersubjectivity* of actor and audience or the *process* of securitization’.¹⁶ Yet rather than join the critics in moving ‘beyond the speech act’, we instead seek to reinvigorate Wæver’s insight that ‘the utterance [“security”] *itself* is the act’.¹⁷ We seek, in other words, to rise to the challenge of providing a “clearer and more elaborated theory of the securitizing *act*”.¹⁸

In the bulk of the essay we thus present a novel theoretical account demonstrating how securitization can be understood as an illocutionary act even as it entails a social process. We conceptualize the speech of securitizing actors as consisting not in ‘an *argument* about the priority and urgency of an existential threat’ so much as in repetitive spouting of ambiguous phrases such as ‘weapons of mass destruction’.¹⁹ We propose, further, that the acceptance of this oft-repeated utterance by an audience consists not in becoming ‘convinced’ or ‘persuaded’ so much as in the audience echoing the phrase, joining in a chorus-like fashion with the securitizing actor to produce a repetitive, ritualized chant.²⁰ In our formulation, then, the audience is not being performed *to*—it is not akin to theater spectators who sit inertly in their seats during the play before applauding the stage performers at the end of the evening. The audience rather partakes in the production of a ‘political spectacle’;²¹ it comes to actively participate in the performance in the manner in which the hearers of a percussion ensemble are moved to tap their

¹⁶ McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’, p. 564; Stritzel, ‘Towards a Theory of Securitization’, pp. 373, 376, emphases in original.

¹⁷ McDonald, *Ibid.*, p. 570; Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, p. 55, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Stritzel, ‘Towards a Theory of Securitization’, p. 376.

¹⁹ Buzan et al., ‘Security’, p. 41, emphasis added.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 34 (‘convinced’); Balzacq, ‘Three Faces of Securitization’, pp. 172, 184 (‘persuaded’).

²¹ Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

fingers and sway their bodies along with the drumbeat. Just as the rhythmic beating of drums creates a sense of unity even as the minds of individual hearers/performers may wander in diverse directions, so does the collective incantation of ambiguous phrases amongst speakers and audiences construct a sense of social oneness even as (or rather because) the chanters lack consensus about the meaning or policy implications of the phrase. Successful securitization, we argue, may be performed through the collective chanting of a phrase that becomes itself the existential threat it ostensibly refers to. In sum, we conceptualize securitization as a ritual process involving the simultaneous interweaving of linguistic repetitions with speakers' and audiences' material performances collectively 'chanting' the phrase to construct a securitized threat.

To illustrate our theoretical account we discuss an empirical case we have already alluded to: the securitization of Iraq in the United States in 2002–2003, that is, the elevation of the Iraqi issue to the level of 'panic politics' or of 'supreme priority' that calls for 'extraordinary means', including war.²² During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq the Bush administration spouted forth, as US Senator Lincoln Chafee (Republican, Rhode Island) put it, a 'steady drumbeat of weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction'.²³ Soon enough this phrase became contagious, ceaselessly reverberating throughout the US media. Even as the meaning of the term was historically variable, ambiguous, and multivocal, and even as many Americans have not heard it before, 'weapons of mass destruction' became so ubiquitous that it was selected America's 2002 'word of the year'.²⁴ The ritualistic choral chanting of this phrase by the administration, the media, and the public constructed, we argue, a heightened generalized sense of danger even as many of the chanters did not necessarily support the invasion of Iraq.

²² Buzan et al., 'Security', pp. 34, 26.

²³ Esther Schrader, 'Lawmakers Grill Wolfowitz on Iraq', *Los Angeles Times* (30 July 2003).

²⁴ Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York: WW Norton, 2003), p. 29.

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The collective incantation of the utterance ‘weapons of mass destruction’ ultimately produced the grave Iraqi threat that it ostensibly described.

Theorizing the securitizing speech act

Prominent American scholars have conceptualized national security policymaking in terms of a ‘marketplace of ideas’.²⁵ In this conceptual framework, government officials communicate fact-based (if often exaggerated) arguments that depict external threats and propose measures to tackle these threats. The media and academy serve as watchdogs who debate the accuracy of the facts and help ‘weed out unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments’.²⁶ In the wake of the debate the public decides whether to ‘buy’ the argument.

The ‘marketplace of ideas’ framework evokes a bygone era—if there ever was such an era—in which sellers communicated largely descriptive information about their products to potential buyers with preexisting tastes. In contemporary mass society, however, the ‘marketplace’ is characterized less by selling goods than by the aggressive marketing of ‘brands’, less by providing fact-based arguments about a product than by fostering consumer identification with values symbolized by a brand.²⁷ Arguably the principal characteristic of modern mass marketing campaigns—a characteristic ‘so obvious’ that its significance is ‘sometimes neglected’—is *repetition*.²⁸ Advertisers continually bombard us with symbols such as brand logos (the Nike swoosh), icons (Marlboro Man; Mr. Clean) and taglines (‘Just do it’; ‘We try

²⁵ Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, ‘Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas’, *International Security*, 21:2 (1996), pp. 5–40.

²⁶ Chaim Kaufmann, ‘Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War’, *International Security*, 29:1 (2004), p. 5.

²⁷ See Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

²⁸ Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 227.

harder'; 'Intel Inside'). These images and words are repeated over and over again because, as political and corporate consultant Frank Luntz put it, 'companies learned an important rule of successful brands: Message consistency builds customer loyalty. . . Finding a good message and sticking with it takes extraordinary discipline but it pays off tenfold in the end'.²⁹

The notion of repetition over time brings us close to work that questions the instantaneity of Wæver's formulation of securitization. Bigo, for example, argues that securitization is better viewed not as a single moment but as a process that occurs through numerous institutional and contextual acts that materially embed securitization efforts. For him, 'security is constructed and applied to different issues and areas through a range of often routinized practices rather than only speech acts that enable emergency measures'.³⁰ Immigration, for instance, has become securitized not only through speech acts by public officials but through a wide range of border control practices.³¹ Similarly, Huysmans critiques prevailing conceptions of securitization because they downplay the role of material practices in productions of (in)security. For Huysmans, the main importance of securitizing speech act lies more 'in the notion of "act" than in "speech"'.³² Securitization efforts by elites are reproduced and materialized in the myriad of actions and practices taken to carry through security policies. 'Speech acts of security seem to be displaced by the diffuse and associative securitizing work of what from the perspective of existential speech acts mostly appear as little security nothings, such as programming algorithms, routine collections of data and looking at CCTV footage'.³³

²⁹ Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), p. 12.

³⁰ Bigo, 'Security and Immigration', p. 65.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jef Huysmans, 'What's in an Act? On Security Speech Acts and Little Security Nothings', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4-5, p. 372.

³³ Ibid.

These insightful conceptualizations of securitization as process rather than as instantaneous speech acts have the advantage of broadening the field of analysis to include aspects far beyond mere speech. Yet, such criticisms perhaps too quickly move beyond ‘speech’ to ‘acts’. We contend that speech act theories have more insights to offer, particularly when applied to the repetitive manner in which securitizing phrases (such as ‘WMD’) bounce around media and political echo chambers. In the following sections we draw upon the concept of ritual as often constituting a key aspect of securitizing processes. This ritual process involves the material performances of both the speakers’ repetitive spouting of phrases and audiences ‘chanting’ the phrase alongside linguistic articulations. The notion of ritual, then, has the advantage of drawing together both the linguistic and the material aspects of securitization into a single theoretical framework.

Securitization and repetition

Repetition is by definition a temporal activity; it takes place over time. Yet, as we noted earlier, the most striking feature of Wæver’s formulation of ‘securitization’, indeed the most striking feature of any successful illocutionary act, is its instantaneity: saying ‘security’ performs securitization at the very moment of the utterance in much the same way that saying ‘I promise to do X’ instantly performs a promise. The key to reconciling the apparent tension between the instantaneity of illocution and the temporality of repetition lies in recognizing, following Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, that not only is illocutionary speech necessarily characterized by conformance to repeatable formulas, repeatability is in fact a condition that makes possible (if not necessarily guarantees) the success of illocutionary speech.

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That the working of speech acts involves correspondence to repeatable formulas was acknowledged by John Austin. In an oft-cited passage he explained that ‘infelicity’, that is, the failure of performative speech to do something, ‘is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts’.³⁴ Austin, in other words, subsumed speech acts within a larger category of performative acts (including, for example, non-verbal gestures like bowing), and he implied that the ability of these acts to transform reality was a function of their ritualized quality and/or their conformance to conventions.³⁵ Austin, then, clearly recognized that the success of words in doing something at the very moment of their utterance depended in part on circumstances that preceded (and likely will succeed) that moment. For example, ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ successfully performs a marriage to the extent that this act corresponds to a convention that, having been followed time and time again, has become sedimented; had this pronouncement not conformed to a ritualized formula, the utterance would have ‘misfired’.³⁶

As Derrida complained, however, Austin’s understanding of the conventional character of performatives was unduly narrow: ‘Austin . . . appears to consider solely the conventionality constituting the *circumstances* of the utterance (*énoncé*), its contextual surroundings, and not a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act (*locution*) itself’.³⁷ Indeed, virtually all the illustrations of conventionality supplied by Austin involve extra-linguistic conventions—for example, the statement ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ is successful if it

³⁴ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, pp. 18–19; emphases in original.

³⁵ Austin later qualified this generalization somewhat, concluding that ‘Illocutionary acts are [always] conventional acts, perlocutionary acts are *not* conventional’—*How To Do Things With Words*, p. 121, emphasis in original.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, in Gerald Graff (ed.) *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.15, emphasis original. We found Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 110–34, very helpful in clarifying Derrida’s critique of Austin.

is uttered by an appropriate person (say, a priest) in an appropriate context (say, a wedding ceremony).

Contra Austin, Derrida argued that the conventionality of speech inheres in speech itself. Referring to Austin's claim that speech acts have "the general character of ritual," Derrida wrote that "'Ritual' is not a possible occurrence (*éventualité*) but rather, *as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every [linguistic] mark'.³⁸ In other words, for Derrida, linguistic signs derive their performative force from their own inherently repeated quality—their 'general iterability'—as much as from conformance to non-linguistic conventions.³⁹ 'Could a performative utterance succeed', Derrida asked rhetorically, 'if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance or, in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation?"'⁴⁰ Derrida went on to discuss how signatures epitomize his claim. The conformance of a signature to a ritualized, repeatable model is the very condition that facilitates its validity: 'In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and singularity, divides its seal'.⁴¹ Indeed, as Culler pointed out, the essential iterability of signatures is brought into sharp relief by observing that signatures are valid even when they are (or precisely because they can be) produced by a machine.⁴² In sum, for Derrida a performative utterance is not a 'singular'

³⁸ Derrida, *Ibid.*, p. 15, emphasis in original.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴² Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 126

event; its working is not strictly confined to a single, isolated moment.⁴³ The past and future repetition of the very same utterance is what makes its performativity possible.

This argument was furthered by Judith Butler. Illocutionary utterances, she wrote,

are not only conventional, but in Austin's words, "ritual or ceremonial." As utterances, they work to the extent that they are given in the form of a ritual, that is, repeated in time, and, hence, maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment of the utterance itself. The illocutionary speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The "moment" in ritual is condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance.⁴⁴

Butler thus clarified a point that was implicit in Derrida's formulation: characterizing illocutionary acts as rituals is tantamount to conceptually stretching the moment of the act along the axis of time. Past, present, and (potential) future invocations of the utterance blur into each other, forming, to repeat Butler's elegant formulation, a 'condensed historicity'.

This theoretical insight—the idea that the 'moment' of an utterance should not be understood literally, that the past and future repetitions of an utterance are condensed into the present instance of its invocation—is readily applicable to securitization campaigns. Drawing upon Derrida and Butler, we can interpret the repetitive uttering of 'security'—utterances that, when successful, create the danger they ostensibly refer to—as forming an extended ritualized moment, a single linguistic 'event'.⁴⁵ Understanding securitizing acts in this fashion allows us to think of them as occurring continually in time without our having to jettison or weaken Wæver's insight that 'the utterance *itself* is the act'. In other words, theorizing the moment of the securitizing act as 'condensed historicity' makes it possible to preserve an understanding of the

⁴³ Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', p. 18.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 3, emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Stritzel, 'Towards a Theory of Securitization'.

act as illocutionary even as, or indeed precisely because, we incorporate temporality into our theoretical account.

To recapitulate, we propose that the speech of securitizing actors may be fruitfully analyzed as consisting not in offering arguments so much as in reiterating simplified phrases (‘rogue/failed state’; ‘border/homeland security’; ‘ethnic cleansing’; ‘regime change’). Following Derrida and Butler we argue that the repetitive uttering of these phrases is a condition of their performativity. The more constantly and frequently a securitizing phrase is being repeated, that is, the more condensed the ‘historicity’ of the phrase becomes, the more likely is the phrase to acquire an illocutionary force, to construct the security threat it ostensibly describes.⁴⁶ Such actions are part of an assemblage of linguistic-material processes in which the audience facilitates the securitizing efforts of speakers through the ritualistic ‘chanting’ of the phrase. This entire ritual of iteration, repetition, and material practice, we argue, should be understood as the securitizing process.

Conceptualizing audience acceptance

While the ritualized spouting of speech acts by securitizing actors enables the success of these acts, it does not guarantee this success. As Buzan and Wæver correctly recognized, for illocutionary acts to succeed in creating reality, they must in some sense be accepted by an audience: ‘A discourse that takes the form of presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object does not by itself create securitization—this is a *securitizing move* but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts this as such’.⁴⁷ Alas, the Copenhagen School’s theorization of audience acceptance was somewhat fuzzy. Even as Buzan and Wæver held fast to

⁴⁶ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Buzan et. al., ‘Security’, p. 25, emphasis in original.

the view that securitization was a *linguistic event*, they appeared at least occasionally (and possibly unintentionally) to portray securitization as an *intellectual process*. Thus, they repeatedly characterized the securitizing move as the making of an ‘argument’ or ‘argue[ing]’, which the Oxford Dictionary Online defines as ‘*give reasons or cite evidence* in support of an idea, action, or theory, typically with the aim of *persuading* others to share one’s view’.⁴⁸ Buzan and Wæver, moreover, alluded to ‘processes’ whereby securitizing actors and audiences construct a ‘shared *understanding*’ of the threat and they associated the acceptance of a securitizing argument by an audience with its becoming ‘convinced’ by the argument.⁴⁹ These formulations evoke an image of an auditorium in which the securitizing actors lecture from the podium while the audience listens passively in its seats. Furthermore, the use of terms like ‘argument’, ‘understanding’, and ‘convince’ implies that the interaction between the actors and their audience operates more on an intellectual level than on a more complex linguistic-material assemblage.

We have argued earlier that the securitizing move involves the spouting forth of ambiguous, simplified phrases more than the communication of arguments. Here, we want to propose that, just as the securitizing move should not be solely understood in terms of arguing—‘give reasons or cite evidence in support of an idea . . .’—so should audience acceptance not be conceptualized in terms of intellectual persuasion or understanding.⁵⁰ Audience acceptance, we contend, is better understood in terms of *belief*: ‘an acceptance that something exists or is true, *especially one without proof*’ or ‘trust, *faith*, or confidence in someone or something’.⁵¹ Belief or

⁴⁸ Ibid. The Oxford Dictionary is available at: {<http://oxforddictionaries.com/>}, accessed 15 September 2012, emphases added.

⁴⁹ Buzan et. al., Ibid., pp. 26, 41, emphasis added. See also Buzan and Hansen, *Evolution of International Security Studies*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Oxford Dictionary Online.

⁵¹ Oxford Dictionary Online, emphases added.

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believing is at the core of the religious experience and practice. It is a concept typically associated with faith and practice as much as with facts or reason.

Our claim that audience acceptance often includes more than intellectual persuasion is partly informed by the recent ‘practice turn’ in IR. This work was largely initiated by Neumann’s contention that discursive approaches put too much emphasis on language at the expense of incorporating other kinds of social actions and lived experiences of agents.⁵² Perhaps the major claim of the practice literature is that ‘it is not only who we are that drives what we do; it is also what we do that determines who we are’.⁵³ As Neumann argues, practice theory focuses on ‘material patterns of action that are organized around the common implicit understandings’ and as such entails the background knowledge that actors habitually rely upon in their actions.⁵⁴ In this sense, there are few aspects of practices that we build upon here. First, a practice is ‘a performance—that is, a process of doing something’.⁵⁵ Processes of ‘doing something’ here are viewed as socially significant and meaningful performances that can both uphold and subtly redefine socially constructed understandings. Second, practices bring together both the discursive and the material aspects of interaction. Practices require language to articulate social meaning, and they entail material enactments that manipulate and change the physical world and collective understandings about the world.⁵⁶

⁵² Iver B. Neumann, ‘Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 627–51.

⁵³ Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Neumann, ‘Returning Practice’, p. 629.

⁵⁵ Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, ‘International practices: introduction and framework’ in Adler and Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 7. See also Emanuel Adler, ‘The Spread of Security Communities: Communities of Practice, Self-Restraint, and NATO’s Post-Cold War Transformation’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:2 (2008), pp. 195–230; Vincent Pouliot, ‘The Materials of Practice: Nuclear Warheads, Rhetorical Commonplaces, and Committee Meetings in Russian-Atlantic Relations’ *Cooperation and Conflict* 45:3 (2010), pp. 294–311.

⁵⁶ Adler and Pouliot, ‘International Practices’, 8.

A key contribution of IR practice research is precisely in its drawing together of the material and the ideational in a framework that allows for nuanced analyses of meaning-making. Yet, practice theory's downplaying of the temporal dimension in the functioning of speech acts is precisely how we supplement practice approaches here. The notion of 'condensed historicity' discussed above helpfully draws out the theoretical significance of the temporality of the illocutionary act, thereby conceptualizing the act more in terms of a process in time. We argue that the ritualized uttering of phrases such as 'WMD' is a condition of their performativity. The more frequently a securitizing phrase (with ultimately contestable meaning) is repeated—the more condensed its 'historicity' becomes—the more likely is the phrase to acquire a processual illocutionary force and cohere into a securitized threat. The political aspects of the materiality of practices can be helpfully analyzed through the repetitive elements of ritual. We argue that securitization succeeds to the extent that the audience itself comes to participate in the performance in a ritualized chanting and repetition of the securitizing discourse. In this sense, we argue that securitization efforts and audience beliefs about threats can be more effectively analyzed by conceptualizing the interplay between the temporality of illocutionary acts, practices as performances, and the materiality of the body. The 'condensed historicity' of the securitizing effort is materially inscribed in the performances of speakers and audiences. Consequently, the particular temporality of the speech act is the condition of possibility of meaningful material performances of speakers and audiences.

Let us return now to our argument that audience acceptance is best understood in terms of belief. A standard way of thinking about beliefs is to view them as attributes of human subjects, attributes that precede and guide the subject's practical actions: I believe that the existing political order is good, hence I regularly cast votes, dutifully pay taxes, sing the national anthem,

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and so on. Or, I believe that country X is a ‘rogue state’ and I thus voice my support for military intervention. But a more compelling (to us at least) way of conceptualizing beliefs is to invert the above formula: I practice, thus I believe. This inversion is a central theme of Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology. Challenging extant conceptions of ideology—conceptions that characterized ideas, distorted though they might be, as prior to human action—Althusser argued that in fact ‘the “ideas” of a human subject exist *in* his actions’, and that these actions are ‘inserted into *practices*’, which, in turn, are ‘governed by’ and ‘inscribed’ in ‘*rituals*’.⁵⁷ As Butler pointed out, ‘Althusser’s insistence that ideology has a “ritual” form’ is a ‘counterpart’ of ‘Austin’s view that the illocutionary speech act is conditioned by its conventional, that is, “ritual” or “ceremonial” dimension’.⁵⁸

Althusser acknowledged a debt to Pascal for his ‘wonderful’ formulation of the inverted relationship between belief and practice. Pascal, according to Althusser, ‘says more or less: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”’. For Pascal (and Althusser), then, belief is not an intellectual choice that precedes the practicing of religious rituals. Belief is rather inscribed in and enacted by these rituals—it is in the repeated performance of verbal and non-verbal practices that one becomes a believer. This formulation may have ‘scandal[ized]’ the Catholic Church during Pascal’s lifetime and it may remain anathema to the Church today, but believers/practitioners of other faiths would not necessarily find Pascal’s position offensive.⁵⁹ Judaism, for example, ‘has historically been a religion of law and hence practice’.⁶⁰ As University of Chicago divinity professor Michael Fishbane explained, ‘In traditional Judaism all

⁵⁷ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 168, first emphasis added, other emphases in original.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 25.

⁵⁹ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 168.

⁶⁰ Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 1.

aspects of life are ritualized through *halakhic* [Jewish law] regulations—from the first thought and prayer in the morning through the final prayers upon one’s bed at night’. These daily rituals

dramatize the ideology of Judaism in concrete forms. And it is just these forms that give the beliefs and attitudes of Judaism their daily texture, their lived quality. . . . Indeed, the beliefs of Judaism become present each day through the prayers, study, and life actions of the Jew. . . . There is thus no abstract affirmation of faith in Judaism. Rather, one performs the *halakha* and, through it, affirms Jewish values and ideals.⁶¹

The similarity between this account of the performativity of Judaism and Pascal’s (and Althusser’s) formula—pray and you will believe—is striking indeed.

While many Jewish rituals are non-verbal, the recitation of liturgical texts is an integral part of Jewish practice. An observant Jew does not only repeat—indeed chant—the same prayers day in and day out, he chants certain phrases multiple times within each individual prayer. Of course, neither the repetitiveness of the liturgy nor the incorporation of musical forms into prayer services is unique to Judaism. Linguist Julia Bamford noted that the liturgies of most religions ‘rely on repetition to create incantatory rhythms’.⁶² And anthropologist Robin Sylvan observed that ‘music and religion are intimately linked in almost every culture and in almost every historical period.’⁶³ To cite a few examples, rhythmic chanting accompanied by drums is an integral aspect of shamanist traditions. The chanting of mantras is a central practice in all forms of Buddhism as is the chanting of Qur’anic verses in Islam’s daily prayers. And hymns are incorporated into ‘Christian liturgy in a myriad of forms, from the solemn tones of Gregorian chant to . . . the African American styling of gospel choirs’.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Michael A. Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelation and Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), pp. 83–4.

⁶² Julia Bamford, *You Can Say That Again: Repetition in Discourse* (Bologna: Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 2000), p. 78.

⁶³ Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimension of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

As anthropologist Richard Jones explained, chanting is a ‘linguistic act’ that functions both to foster group solidarity (more on which later) and to affect individual minds. At the individual level, ‘Anyone who has ever repeated the same word over and over again has noticed that any repeated word, or string of words, eventually seems to become strange and meaningless’. Chanting thus has the capacity ‘to put the mind beyond words and into an altered state of consciousness in order to, for example, achieve enlightenment, to personally experience God, or to enter into the spirit world’.⁶⁵ Through chanting—whether it takes place in a house of worship or in secular venues such as music clubs or football stadiums—individual minds may possibly come to transcend reality, ‘experiencing a powerful form of virtual reality’.⁶⁶

Furthermore, chanting, like all music, affects the human *body* as well as the mind. The truth of Nietzsche’s saying that ‘we listen to music with our muscles’ is readily evident when music moves us to sway our bodies, ‘tap our feet, . . . “keep time”, hum, sing along or “conduct”’.⁶⁷ Chanting even affects our brains in involuntary ways. The words of simple, endlessly repeated popular songs/chants become lodged in our memory even if we did not care to remember them.⁶⁸ And ‘all of us have experienced the involuntary, helpless mental replaying of songs or tunes’, sometimes called “earworms”, for they may burrow into us, entrench themselves and then persevere internally hundreds of times a day’.⁶⁹

* * *

Let us now return to securitization theory and draw upon the above theoretical ideas to elucidate ‘audience acceptance’. The audience is not akin to students in an academic lecture hall

⁶⁵ Richard R. Jones, ‘Chants’, in *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), p. 478.

⁶⁶ Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, p. 33.

⁶⁷ Oliver Sacks, ‘The Power of Music’, *Brain*, 129:10 (2006), p. 2528, including the Nietzsche quotation.

⁶⁸ Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 21.

⁶⁹ Sacks, ‘Power of Music’, p. 2530.

or to theatergoers who are mostly performed *to*. Instead, securitization succeeds to the extent that the audience comes to participate in the performance in a manner more characteristic of music club goers or worshippers in sanctuaries where chanting and music play a central role.

Securitization succeeds when the 'mantras' repeated by securitizing actors in speeches and news releases jump to the pages of the print media, skip into the wording of frequently-asked and widely-reported opinion poll questions, reverberate through talk shows, news broadcasts and other electronic media programming, echo throughout the blogosphere, and, increasingly in recent years, flood the social media. Mediated by these media forms, the securitizing phrase infiltrates and even infects everyday talk, including, for example, dinner party conversations, chatter around office water coolers, and discussions in school and college classrooms. The utterances of the securitizing actors and the audience thus combine into a chorus, a collective chant that, though it is performed in time, constitutes a single linguistic event.

The audience, moreover, should not solely be understood as a passive receiver of securitizing arguments who then decides whether these arguments are logically or factually valid. Audience members cannot quite check the accuracy of the securitizing phrases they hear because, as we will discuss further below, these phrases are typically ambiguous (what exactly is a 'rogue state'? a 'weapon of mass destruction'?) and new to most people (how many people were familiar with 'ethnic cleansing' before it became a stock phrase in the 1990s?). We propose that many, if not all, members of the audience rather come to *believe* in the alleged security threat in the manner theorized by Althusser: the threat comes into existence *in* one's chanting of the phrase that ostensibly describes this threat. The phrase becomes itself the threat.

As the securitizing phrase echoes in people's ears, and as they themselves join in repeating it, the phrase becomes materially 'inscribed' in people's bodies.⁷⁰ The phrase 'burrows into' audience members by becoming stuck in their memory like a refrain of a popular song, or even by becoming 'entrenched' in the brain in the form of an 'earworm'.⁷¹ As to people's minds, we do not argue that one's participation in the society-wide chanting of securitizing phrases *literally* alters his/her consciousness in the way in which it may be altered in the course of a trance party or a Sufi ceremony. Still, we propose that 'trance-formation'—the capacity of the rhythmic incantation of words to take the chanter's consciousness 'beyond words', creating a virtually-real consciousness of vague yet palpable danger—is a powerful metaphor that elucidates the audience's acceptance of securitizing phrases.⁷² This metaphor is a useful aide to understanding securitization in the same way that 'drumbeat' remains a rightly-popular conceptualization of war mobilization even as in contemporary society we no longer literally beat war drums.

Political ritual and social solidarity

Chanting is typically performed in group settings. In addition to putting individual minds beyond words 'the ultimate purpose of chanting is to express group solidarity and cohesiveness'.⁷³ As Emile Durkheim wrote in 1915, 'It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that [people] become

⁷⁰ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 168.

⁷¹ Sacks, 'Power of Music', p. 2530.

⁷² Robin Sylvan, *Trance Formation: The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of Global Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Jones, 'Chants', p. 478.

⁷³ Jones, 'Chants', p. 478.

and feel themselves to be in unison'. For Durkheim and subsequent generations of anthropologists, communal ritual activity is 'necessary' for creating social solidarity.⁷⁴

In his seminal study of political rituals, anthropologist David Kertzer stressed that solidarity should not be equated with social harmony or political consensus. On the contrary, anthropologists have learned that 'the greater the divisiveness in society, the greater the need for compensatory ritual to hold the society together'.⁷⁵ The genius of ritual lies precisely in fostering a sense of unity in the absence of political or social consensus. Ritual 'can promote social solidarity without implying that people share the same values, or even the same interpretation of the ritual'.⁷⁶ Take, for example, the US Constitution, which Max Lerner once called the 'American totem'. The invocation of the Constitution in public life serves as a 'unifying national force' even as many Americans are at best dimly familiar with the content of the document and even as deep political divisions surround the interpretation of key parts of the Constitution.⁷⁷ Similarly, when a crowd in a sports arena rises to chant the national anthem, the communal singing fosters a feeling of oneness even as the partisan preferences and inner attitudes of individual spectators may be significantly divergent, with some chanters expressing deep-seated patriotic values, others singing mechanically as their thoughts wander in various directions, and yet others who might inwardly scorn the ritual but take part in it to avoid disapproving stares. By the same token, when a securitizing phrase 'catches fire', echoing throughout the media and skipping into everyday talk, the emergent chorus produces a general 'atmosphere of strangeness,

⁷⁴ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 62, including the Durkheim quotation.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69. In this vein, Lisa Wedeen, in her *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 87–88, found that 'Images of national unity do not do away with the divisions that generate lively worlds of debate in Yemen. Both the elections and the [North-South] unity celebrations provided discursive contexts within which alternative forms of group identification and politics could take place'.

⁷⁷ Kertzer, *Ritual*, pp. 64–5.

danger, and fear' even as the chanters may not share the same political values and even as some of them may oppose the policies promoted by the securitizing actors.⁷⁸ In fact, when opponents of securitization incorporate the securitizing phrase into their speech—stating, for example, that 'our country has no business intervening in "failed states"'—they participate in the choral chanting of the phrase all the same; they thus contribute to the consolidation of a generalized atmosphere of threat in the same manner that absent-minded or reluctant chanters of the anthem still contribute to the crowd's sense of cohesion.⁷⁹

Kertzer explained that the capacity of political rituals to build solidarity in the absence of consensus is rooted in the *ambiguity* of the symbols whose repetition makes up these rituals. 'WMD', as illustrated below, is an example of an ambiguous symbol. As we have detailed elsewhere,⁸⁰ the meaning of 'WMD' has shifted over time, and this unfixed meaning has opened the phrase up as a site of political contestation, allowing for its repetition across diverse audiences. Kertzer's emphasis on ambiguity in ritual closely parallels the concept of the 'empty signifier' from a discourse-theoretical perspective. Empty signifiers are terms that have no 'intrinsic' meaning and thus their meaning is unable to be fully pinned down, yet it is this ambiguity that opens them up as sites of contestations. This unfixity is in fact necessary for their contestability in the first place and their historicity.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁷⁹ Although space constraints prohibit a detailed discussion, these interweaving roles of belief and materiality raise the issue of affect in securitization. One route worth exploring here would be how affects play a role in audience acceptance of securitization discourses. Such work could follow recent research demonstrating the role of emotions in rebuilding communities after crises. See Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Emotional Reconciliation: Reconstituting Identity and Community after Trauma', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11:3 (2008), pp. 385–403. On emotions and beliefs, see Jonathan Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', *International Organization*, 64:1 (2000), pp. 1-31.

⁸⁰ Author

⁸¹ David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory' in Howarth, Aletta Norval, and Stavrakakis (eds), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 8.

The ambiguity of symbols such as 'WMD' derives, according to Kertzer, from two common properties of ritual symbolism: condensation of meaning and multivocality. Condensation denotes the way in which symbols bring together a rich diversity of ideas.⁸² Consider, for example, the term 'axis of evil', which the George W. Bush administration coined in 2002 in reference to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Not only did this symbol lump together three countries that differ from each other in many ways, it also packed into three short words two loaded concepts, one fraught with religious significance, the other evocative of the heroic struggle against Fascism.

Partly because of their condensation, ritual symbols tend to be *multivocal*. Multiple meanings become attached to the same symbol so that 'the same symbol may be understood by different people in different ways'.⁸³ For example, attentive news consumers may have understood that the 'axis of evil', as invoked by the Bush administration, referred to the three above-mentioned countries but many Americans may not have acquired a clear idea of who exactly the phrase referred to, while yet other Americans may have associated the term with other regimes. Furthermore, while for many Americans, especially Republicans, the phrase came to represent the vigor and resoluteness of the administration's foreign policy, for other Americans it may have represented unnecessary swagger and immoderation.

The complexity and uncertainty of securitizing phrases thus make it possible for them to be adopted and chanted by people who do not share political values and who do not see eye to eye on the securitization of the issue at stake. Notwithstanding the lack of political consensus, as long as these people are, in Durkheim's words, 'uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same

⁸² Kertzer, *Ritual*, p. 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

word . . . in regard to some object' they partake in fostering a shared sense of danger surrounding this object, thus securitizing the object.

The implication of this insight for empirical analyses of securitization is that, in gauging the audience's acceptance of the securitizing message, we should not necessarily expect to find evidence that the public has come to be of one mind with regard to the policies favored by the securitizing actors. Observing that a significant number of people express doubts or even oppose these policies is perfectly compatible with securitization so long as the doubters/opponents join in the ritualistic uttering of the securitizing phrase. Securitization 'is produced by people acting [chanting] together, not by people thinking together'.⁸⁴

An illustration: WMD and the securitization of Iraq

During 2002 and early 2003 Iraq had become securitized in the United States, that is, the Iraqi regime has been designated by the Bush administration and a 'significant audience' as 'an existential threat requiring emergency action or special measures'.⁸⁵ In March 2003 the Bush administration took the special measure of invading Iraq.

The central theme of the administration's securitization campaign was the danger of Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction'. Beginning with the January 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush and senior administration officials uttered this phrase multiple times in most of their public appearances.⁸⁶ For example, on March 24, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on three major television programs to express deep concerns about, as he told CNN, 'the development of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein, his refusal to comply with

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸⁵ Buzan et. al., 'Security', p. 27.

⁸⁶ Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, 'Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric', *Perspectives on Politics*, 3:3 (2005), p. 531.

the UN Security Council Resolution 687, . . . which said he would get rid of all his weapons of mass destruction'.⁸⁷

In August 2002 the White House was put on the defensive by a growing opposition galvanized by an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal*. Titled 'Don't Bomb Saddam', the article was authored by former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, a confidante of the president's father.⁸⁸ To regain momentum, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card convened a high-level group whose 'mission was to market a war in Iraq'.⁸⁹ Although the formation of this group—the White House Iraq Group (WHIG)—was not made public, Card hinted at its task on September 6, 2002, when he told the *New York Times* that 'From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August'.⁹⁰

Among the members of the WHIG were several specialists in strategic communication, including the president's senior political advisor, Karl Rove. In a remarkably candid comment he made to journalist Ron Suskind, Rove

said that guys like me [Suskind] were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. . . . 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Richard Cheney, 'The Vice President Appears on Late Edition' CNN, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/vicepresident/news-speeches/speeches/vp20020324-2.html> accessed 31 July 2012}.

⁸⁸ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 163–66.

⁸⁹ Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Told: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 189, 57.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Barton Gellman and Walter Pincus, 'Depiction of Threat Outgrew Supporting Evidence', *Washington Post* (August 10, 2003).

⁹¹ Ron Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *New York Times* (17 October 2004). Suskind actually attributed this remark to an unnamed senior official who was 'widely known' to have been Rove—see Mark Danner, *Stripping Bare the Body: Politics, Violence, War* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), p. 555.

It is unclear whether he ever studied the philosophy of language, but Rove's comment surely evinced a solid grasp of the concepts of social construction and speech acts.

The WHIG coordinated 'a dramatic public relations offensive to sell the American public on the war'.⁹² On the first day of the offensive, Sunday, September 8, the Group planted in the *New York Times* a 'carefully constructed' double metaphor that National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice echoed on CNN: 'we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud'.⁹³ In the CNN appearance in which she debuted the 'mushroom cloud' metaphor, Rice also uttered 'weapons of mass destruction' 13 times.⁹⁴ In a televised prime time speech he gave in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002, President Bush alluded to 'weapons of mass destruction' eight times in 26 minutes.⁹⁵ A shorter speech Bush delivered in Fort Hood, Texas, on January 3, 2003, contained as many utterances of this expression, packing five of them into a short paragraph:

The Iraqi regime has used weapons of mass destruction. They not only had weapons of mass destruction, they used weapons of mass destruction. They used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people. That's why I say Iraq is a threat, a real threat.⁹⁶

A month later, Secretary of State Colin Powell repeated the term 17 times in his widely-watched address to the UN Security Council.⁹⁷

⁹² Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 29. See also Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's war on Iraq* (London: Robinson Press, 2003).

⁹³ Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, pp. 35, 42.

⁹⁴ CNN, 'Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer: Interview with Condoleezza Rice', 8 September 2002, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0209/08/le.00.html> accessed 31 July 2012}.

⁹⁵ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 201–02.

⁹⁶ 'President Rallies Troops at Fort Hood', 3 January 2003, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030103.html> accessed 31 July 2012}.

⁹⁷ 'Full Text of Colin Powell's Speech', *The Guardian* (5 February 2003). While we focus here on the immediate run-up to the Iraq war, we concur with Russell A. Burgos ('Origins of Regime Change: 'Ideapolitik' and the Long Road to Baghdad: 1993-2000', *Security Studies*, 17:2 (2008), p. 221) that the Bush administration's 'rhetoric was firmly embedded in a pre-existing foreign policy consensus defining Saddam Hussein as the "problem" and his overthrow the "solution"'. We similarly recognize that 'WMD' can be seen as part of a broader 'discourse of danger' that produced collective understandings of 'us' and

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In sum, the incessant repetition of the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ was a central aspect of the Bush administration’s campaign to securitize Iraq. Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, the only Republican senator who opposed the war, was hardly exaggerating when he later complained that the administration’s case for invading Iraq consisted in a ‘steady drumbeat of weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction’.⁹⁸ The conjunction of this phrase with other ominous tropes such as ‘mushroom cloud’ only reinforced the imagery that ‘WMD’ itself evoked.

It did not take long for Congressional leaders to amplify the administration’s drumbeat. On September 4, 2002, Dick Gephardt, the leader of the Democratic minority in the House of Representatives, advised President Bush to dramatize the Iraqi threat to the American people. ‘It’s about weapons of mass destruction getting in the wrong hands’, Gephardt said; the American people ‘don’t see it. We have to do everything in our power to keep WMD from going off. We need to make it graphic’.⁹⁹ Shortly thereafter the phrase began reverberating through Congress as its members were debating a resolution authorizing the war. For example, on October 8, 2002 John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, declared on the Senate floor that he would support the resolution because ‘a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in [Saddam Hussein’s] hands is a threat, and a grave threat, to our security’.¹⁰⁰

The insertion of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ into opinion poll questions was another avenue through which this phrase spread from official to public discourse. For example, beginning in February 2002 the Gallup organization regularly included in its surveys the question: ‘Do you think Iraq currently has weapons of mass destruction, is trying to develop

‘them’ after September 11, 2001. See David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁹⁸ Schrader, ‘Lawmakers Grill Wolfowitz’.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 203.

these weapons but does not currently have them, or is not trying to develop weapons of mass destruction?'.¹⁰¹ As much as such questions registered preexisting opinion, their very inclusion in widely-reported polls *shaped* public opinion by naturalizing the notion that Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction' were an urgent security problem.¹⁰²

Soon enough 'weapons of mass destruction' became a daily staple of the US press. As figure 1 illustrates, the frequency with which the *Wall Street Journal* printed this phrase was virtually zero in the 1980s and moderate in the 1990s before spiking dramatically in 2002 and 2003.¹⁰³ A similar pattern was characteristic of other leading newspapers. In the *New York Times*, for example, the frequency of articles in which this phrase appeared took off from 60 in 2000 to 524 in 2002 and 853 in 2003 (in many of these articles the phrase appeared more than once). Figure 2, moreover, demonstrates that during the twelve months preceding the invasion of Iraq the incidence of 'weapons of mass destruction' in leading US press publications has increased almost tenfold. Much of this increase coincided with the launching of the government's marketing campaign in early September 2002. In the seven month period bracketed by this event and the outbreak of the war, the phrase appeared on average in 100 articles per month in the *New York Times*, compared with an average of 27 articles per month during the preceding seven months.

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¹⁰¹ David W. Moore, 'Public Taking Wait-and-See Attitude on U.N. Inspections', *Gallup News Service*, 12 December 2002, available at {<http://www.gallup.com/poll/7408/public-taking-waitandsee-attitude-un-inspections.aspx>} accessed 31 July 2012}.

¹⁰² See Ty Solomon, 'Social Logics and Normalization in the War on Terror', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 38:2 (2009), pp. 269-94.

¹⁰³ The data presented in figures 1-3 were generated by using the Factiva.com search engine, operated by the Dow Jones Corporation. Factiva.com's category of 'major U.S. news and business publications' (figures 2 and 3) includes some forty newspapers and magazines 'covering general news and business news that are considered key publications in their region by virtue of circulation or reputation'.

No sooner than it flooded the US media, the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ invaded the everyday talk of ordinary Americans. This linguistic invasion was powerfully if indirectly evidenced by the fact that the American Dialect Society (ADS) selected the phrase as its 2002 ‘Word of the Year’, that is, the year’s most ‘newly prominent or notable’ vocabulary item.¹⁰⁴ To put it in perspective, recent Word of the Year selections included ‘bailout’ (2008), ‘tweet’ (2009), ‘app’ (2010), and ‘occupy’ (2011). Wordsmith Ben Zimmer, who co-chaired over the 2011 selection process, said that ‘The [Occupy] movement itself was powered by the word’.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, the 2002 Word of the Year can be said to have powered, indeed embodied, the securitization of Iraq.

* * *

In commercial marketing, ‘the most unforgettable catchphrases’ are characterized by brevity; when such phrases ‘initially haven’t been so simple, someone inevitably has stepped in to shorten them. Just ask the makers of the Macintosh (“*Mac*”) computer . . . Federal Express is now officially “*FedEx*”, Kentucky Fried Chicken is now “*KFC*”’.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, just as these corporations have profited from the abridgment of their brand names, so has the marketing of the Iraq war to the American people benefitted from the abbreviation of the flabby ‘weapons of mass destruction’ into a trim acronym. As figure 3 indicates, whereas the acronym WMD almost never appeared in America’s major newspapers in the 1990s, during the lead-up to the Iraq War the same publications printed this abbreviation hundreds of times. Furthermore, as the war approached, the acronym became so common that reporters and commentators no longer felt compelled to spell it out. The drumbeat became peppier: WMD, WMD, WMD.

¹⁰⁴ Barber, *Fear’s Empire*, p. 29; American Dialect Society, ‘“Occupy” 2011 Word of the Year’, available at {<http://www.americandialect.org/occupy-is-the-2011-word-of-the-year>} accessed 30 July 2012}.

¹⁰⁵ American Dialect Society, ‘Occupy’.

¹⁰⁶ Luntz, *Words that Work*, p. 6.

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As Herbert Marcuse explained in a lucid ‘note on abridgment’, at the same time that abbreviations perform the ‘perfectly reasonable’ function of simplifying speech or prose, their use also performs an inconspicuous *rhetorical* function: ‘help[ing] to repress undesired questions’. For example, ‘NATO does not suggest what North Atlantic Treaty Organization says, namely a treaty among the nations on the North Atlantic—in which case one might ask questions about the membership of Greece and Turkey. . . . DDR [elides] democratic. UN dispenses with undue emphasis on “united”’.¹⁰⁷ In keeping with Marcuse’s analysis, we note that the popularization of WMD helped ‘repress undesired questions’ surrounding administration statements such as (in President Bush’s words) ‘They used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people’. Because WMD elides the words ‘mass destruction’, the growing prominence of the abbreviation in public discourse made it less likely that audience members would stop their chanting to ask questions like: can poison gas—the weapon that the above statement interchanged ‘weapons of mass destruction’ for—truly cause ‘mass destruction’ even as gas cannot destroy property? Did the gas the Iraqi regime use against ‘its own people’ actually cause ‘mass destruction’? Could the employment of chemical weapons by Iraq truly pose a grave danger to the security of the United States? To borrow Marcuse’s words again, ‘Once [WMD] has become an official vocable, constantly repeated in general usage, “sanctioned” by the intellectuals, it has lost all cognitive value and serve[d] merely for recognition of an unquestionable fact’.¹⁰⁸

* * *

¹⁰⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ Marcuse, *Ibid.*

While the bureaucrats and defense intellectuals who ‘constantly repeated’ this ‘official vocable’ may have shared a specific understanding of the meaning of WMD, this meaning was not necessarily shared by ordinary Americans. In fact, many Americans had barely heard the term ‘weapons of mass destruction’ before 2002. In November 1997, against the backdrop of growing tensions surrounding the weapons inspection regime in Iraq, *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter admitted that ‘until recently’ he ‘didn’t know’ the meaning of WMD. He proceeded to explain that WMD was ‘bureaucratic shorthand widely known inside the government, but right now it’s barely a blip in the public consciousness’.¹⁰⁹ In the same vein, Michael Kinsley pointed out in 2003 that ‘The term [weapons of mass destruction] is a new one to almost everybody, and the concern it officially embodies was on almost no one’s radar screen until recently’.¹¹⁰

That many of Americans did not have an unambiguous picture of WMD in their head cannot entirely be attributed to intellectual laziness, for even if they were sufficiently curious to suspend the incantation of the phrase in order to search for its ‘true’, precise meaning, they would have had difficulty finding it. To summarize a detailed history of the phrase that we present elsewhere, when ‘weapons of mass destruction’ first appeared in diplomatic documents and the US press in November 1945, it had no clear definition.¹¹¹ In subsequent arms control negotiations diplomats and commentators have debated a wide range of definitions before the UN Commission on Conventional Armament resolved in 1948 that the WMD category included atomic, radiological, biological, and chemical weapons, as well as future weapons capable of comparable destruction. During the Cold War, however, the phrase gradually receded from

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Alter, ‘Why This Is Not a Drill’, *Newsweek* (17 November 1997).

¹¹⁰ Michael Kinsley, ‘Low Opinion: Did Iraq Have Weapons of Mass Destruction? It Doesn’t Matter’, *Slate* (19 June 2003), available at {<http://www.slate.com/id/2084602/>} accessed 25 July 2012}.

¹¹¹ Author.

public view and, to the extent that it has been mentioned in the US press, it was typically associated with nuclear weapons alone; for example, in contrast with president Bush's statement in 2003 that 'The Iraqi regime has used weapons of mass destruction', the US press did not employ this term in the 1980s in its reporting on Iraq's use of poison gas. In the 1990s the phrase made a minor comeback into foreign policy discourse as a result of its incorporation into the 1991 Security Council resolution that imposed an arms inspection regime on Iraq. At the same time, however, the phrase jumped into the language of domestic US anti-crime legislation, where it was defined in far broader terms than those of the UN's 1948 definition (including, for example, any conventional 'bomb, grenade, rocket having a propellant charge of more than four ounces'). Based on this law federal prosecutors have regularly pressed WMD charges not only against terrorism suspects such as 'shoe bomber' Richard Reid but also in cases involving petty domestic crime. For instance, a short time after the US invaded Iraq to remove the existential threat of WMD, a Pennsylvania man was sent to prison for mailing his former doctor a 'weapon of mass destruction' assembled from 'black gunpowder, a carbon dioxide cartridge, a nine-volt battery, a model rocket igniter, and dental floss'.¹¹²

'Weapons of mass destruction,' then, possesses the typical properties of political ritual symbols.¹¹³ First, it *condenses* into three words, or even three letters, multiple weapon systems that 'are fundamentally different in terms of lethality', as well as the iconic image of the atomic mushroom cloud.¹¹⁴ Second, it is ambiguous. Throughout its history the meaning of the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' has been contested, changeable, and, to most Americans, obscure.

¹¹² John Shiffman, 'Unhappy over Surgery, He Now Faces Prison', *Philadelphia Inquirer* (5 April 2006).

¹¹³ Kertzer, *Ritual*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Philip Morrison and Kosta Tsipis, 'Rightful Names', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 59:3 (2003), p. 77.

Finally, ‘weapon of mass destruction’ is multivocal. It has had multiple meanings and it has meant different things to different people.

As we discussed earlier, these properties allow the ritualized repetition of political symbols to foster a sense of social oneness in the absence of political consensus. The Iraq War was a divisive issue in American politics and a sizable minority of Americans adamantly opposed the invasion. Yet the chanting of WMD, WMD, WMD, transcended the political divide as opponents of the war embraced the term, repeating it reflexively and uncritically. For example, speaking on the same news program in which Condoleezza Rice debuted the ‘mushroom cloud’ metaphor, Senator Bob Graham (Democrat, Florida), who would later vote against authorizing the war, uttered ‘weapons of mass destruction’ seven times. Similarly, IR scholars John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, both outspoken critics of the Iraq war, repeated the phrase six times in an op-ed article in the *New York Times*.¹¹⁵

By joining the chorus chanting ‘WMD’, the opponents of the war helped consolidate a generalized atmosphere of danger, thus contributing to the securitization of Iraq, even as, on the intellectual level, they were not persuaded by the Bush administration’s case for war. With the caveat that, as we noted earlier, polls shape public opinion as much as they register it, it is nonetheless significant that, when Americans were asked by pollsters whether they supported or opposed the use of force against Iraq, ‘the results were exceptionally consistent’ over time.¹¹⁶ In survey after survey conducted throughout 2002 and early 2003, just under sixty percent of the respondents expressed support for an invasion while just over a third of them indicated

¹¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. ‘Keeping Saddam Hussein in a Box’, *New York Times* (2 February 2003).

¹¹⁶ Ole R. Holsti, *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 30.

opposition.¹¹⁷ Remarkably, these levels of support/opposition were recorded by pollsters even before the focus of the administration's rhetoric shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq. Equally remarkably, the launching of the administration's war marketing campaign in September 2002 made virtually no dent in this pattern. There is little evidence, then, that the administration's 'argument' for war 'convinced' the American people to change their minds about the Iraqi threat. The securitization of Iraq was made successful not by 'people thinking together' so much as by people chanting together: WMD, WMD, WMD.¹¹⁸

We conclude this section with a passage penned by columnist Michael Kinsley in June 2003.

By now, WMD have taken on a mythic role in which fact doesn't play much of a part. The phrase itself—'weapons of mass destruction'—is more like an incantation than a description of anything in particular. The term is a new one to almost everybody, and the concern it officially embodies was on almost no one's radar screen until recently. Unofficially, "weapons of mass destruction" are to George W. Bush what fairies were to Peter Pan. He wants us to say, 'We DO believe in weapons of mass destruction. We DO believe. We DO'. If we all believe hard enough, they will be there. And it's working.¹¹⁹

Kinsley's observation, though it is not stated in theoretical language (or perhaps *because* it is not), forcefully captures the logic of our argument on WMD and the securitization of Iraq.

Conclusion

What are the implications of our argument for activists, scholars, or other 'audience members' who wish to oppose a move to securitize an issue? Can opponents of securitization avoid uttering the central phrase of a securitization campaign? If not, what can they do to resist securitization? These are difficult questions that some students of securitization have wrestled

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, 'Latest Update Shows No Change in Support for Invasion of Iraq', *Gallup News Service*, available at {<http://www.gallup.com/poll/7942/latest-update-shows-change-support-invasion-iraq.aspx>} accessed 20 June 2012}.

¹¹⁸ Kertzer, *Ritual*, p. 76.

¹¹⁹ Kinsley, 'Low Opinion'.

with. Huysmans, for example, recognized a ‘dilemma’ for securitization researchers who wish to avoid securitizing the issue at hand.¹²⁰ If we accept the performative power of language, there is the possibility that the securitization scholars’ very writing will contribute to the securitization processes under study. Moreover, it remains unclear how to negotiate this tension. On one hand, even as it demonstrates the contingency and historicity of a securitization effort, critical scholarship ‘does not necessarily undermine the real effects’ of such discourse.¹²¹ On the other hand, arguing that securitization discourses ‘distort’ the ‘reality’ of security politics denies the performative power of language and thus renders the securitization approach epistemologically inconsistent.¹²² Although maintaining reflective awareness of this tension is necessary, Huysmans argues that there is ultimately no solution to this dilemma—this approach to language ‘makes any security utterance potentially securitizing’.¹²³

While we find Huysmans’s analysis perceptive, we propose that following Butler here can lead to a potentially more promising strategy of engagement. In her analysis of injurious speech acts, Butler pointed out that “no one has ever worked through an injury without repeating it; . . . There is no possibility of *not* repeating” the words of hateful speech even as our goal is to combat that speech.¹²⁴ By the same token, it may not be possible to combat a securitizing speech act without repeating the words ourselves. It may not be possible, for example, to entirely avoid uttering the words ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in pushing back against a securitization campaign centered on the spouting of this very phrase.

¹²⁰ Jef Huysmans, ‘Defining Social Constructivism in Security Studies: The Normative Dilemma of Writing Security’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 27: Special Issue (2002), pp. 41–62.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50–1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Sovereign Performatives in the Contemporary Scene of the Utterance’, *Critical Inquiry*, 23:2 (1997), p. 351, emphasis original.

The question, then, is not if but *how* we should repeat the securitizing phrase. Are we going to repeat the phrase reflexively, thus naturalizing it and reproducing the meaning that the securitizing actors sought to attach to the phrase? Are we going to incorporate the phrase into an intellectual rebuttal to the argument made by the securitizing actors? This is what the many scholars and commentators who have opposed the Iraq war have done, with limited success. They basically saw themselves as participants in a ‘marketplace of ideas’, where their role was to ‘weed out unfounded, mendacious . . . arguments’.¹²⁵ They failed to see that the administration’s securitizing move was not, in Karl Rove’s words, ‘reality-based’ so much as reality-creating. By reflexively repeating the key utterances of the administration’s marketing campaign they unintentionally helped consolidate the reality—the sense of a grave Iraqi menace—that the administration sought to construct.

A more effective strategy for combating the marketing of security threats would begin by recognizing, following Derrida, that repeating a term ‘never simply produce a replica of the original usage’—every repetition potentially ‘transforms meaning, adds to it’.¹²⁶ Indeed, ambiguous and multivocal catchphrases are particularly amenable to such a transformation of meaning. As Butler explained with regard to injurious utterances, their ‘equivocality’ means that such utterances ‘might not always mean in the same way, that [their] meaning might be turned or derailed in some significant way . . . The disjuncture between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for revising the performative, of the performative as the repetition of its prior instance, a repetition that is at once a reformulation’.¹²⁷ The ‘reevaluation’ of the word ‘queer’—a term that used to be exclusively derogatory before being appropriated as a term of

¹²⁵ Kaufmann, ‘Threat Inflation’, p. 5.

¹²⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 47.

¹²⁷ Butler, ‘Sovereign Performatives’, p. 365.

pride—is a notable example of a successful ‘repetition that is at once a reformulation.’¹²⁸ Similar reformulations of injurious speech have occurred in the realm of the arts, including, notably, the resignification of racist epithets in their repetition by rap artists.¹²⁹

Butler further points out that the repetition of a word in the aesthetic realm

may both *use* the word and *mention* it, that is, make use of it to produce certain effects but also at the same time make reference to that very use, calling attention to it as a citation, situating that use within a citational legacy, making that use into an explicit discursive item to be reflected on rather than a taken-for-granted operation of ordinary language. Or, it may be that an aesthetic reenactment *uses* that word but also *displays* it, points to it, outlines it as the arbitrary material instance of language that is exploited to produce certain kinds of effects.¹³⁰

In keeping with this insight, we propose that, rather than repeat the utterances of securitizing actors exclusively in the context of a debate over ideas, opponents of securitization may want to shift their efforts to the aesthetic plane. And rather than repeat the phrase primarily in ‘serious’ outlets such as op-ed pages or news programs, opponents should consider repeating it in arts and entertainment venues or forms. Mock the word by repeating it mechanically in comedy acts; incorporate it into rap songs and *faux* poems; turn the word into the butt of jokes on late night television shows; parody the uttering of the word in blog posts; repeat it in satirical writing.

Consider, for example, a March 2004 episode of the TV mob drama *The Sopranos*. In this episode, a character is asked by the authorities to open his garage, which is suspected of containing illegal materials. ‘That’s where I make my weapons of mass destruction’, he wisecracks, trying to distract the officer.¹³¹ Similarly, a 2006 episode of *The Simpsons* featured a plot where aliens used the claim that humans were manufacturing ‘weapons of mass

¹²⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 14.

¹²⁹ Butler, ‘Sovereign Performatives’, p. 375.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, emphases in original.

¹³¹ A recapitulation of the episode is available at {www.avclub.com/review/the-sopranos-all-happy-families-63274}; accessed 20 December 2013.

disintegration' as an excuse to invade Earth.¹³² These episodes hint at the kinds of efforts Butler's analysis suggests—re-signifying 'WMD' in the realm of popular culture in order to undermine the political efficacy of this securitizing phrase.

Michael Kinsley's above-quoted satire ("weapons of mass destruction" are to George W. Bush what fairies were to Peter Pan. He wants us to say, "We DO believe in weapons of mass destruction. We DO believe. We DO"), too, was an exemplar of Butler's 'aesthetic reenactment'. Kinsley used the phrase WMD repeatedly at the same time that he put it on display, nudging the reader to reflect on the phrase's arbitrariness and the way in which it was 'exploited to produce certain kinds of effects'.¹³³ Indeed, in light of the key factor of repetition that is central to ongoing securitization efforts, attempts like these (and the popular culture instances above) did succeed to an extent in challenging the dominant discourse as the war progressed. Yet, Kinsley's piece, like the aforementioned TV episodes, was published after the invasion of Iraq. Earlier aesthetic reenactments of 'weapons of mass destruction' were ultimately attempted too little, too late to counteract the successful securitization of Iraq in the run-up to war.

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¹³² 'Simpsons' Halloween "'Horror" Could Hit GOP', available at {www.abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=2600380&page=1} accessed 20 December 2013.

¹³³ Butler, 'Sovereign Performatives', p. 375.

Figure 1: Frequency of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in the *Wall Street Journal*, 1980-2003

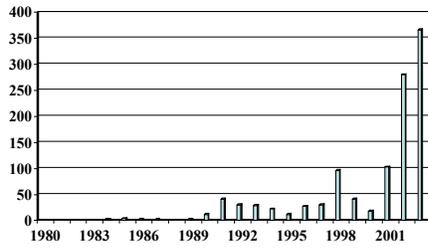


Figure 2: Monthly Frequencies of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in Major U.S. Publications During the Run-Up to War

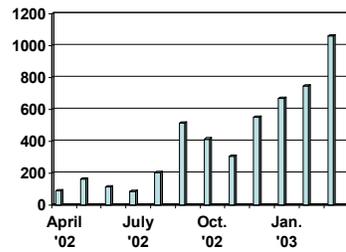


Figure 3: Frequency of the Acronym WMD in Major U.S. Publications

