

This article was downloaded by: [University of Florida]

On: 07 April 2013, At: 04:25

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## New Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnps20>

## WMD: The Career of a Concept

Ido Oren<sup>a</sup> & Ty Solomon<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Florida, USA

<sup>b</sup> University of South Florida-St. Petersburg, USA

Version of record first published: 25 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Ido Oren & Ty Solomon (2013): WMD: The Career of a Concept, New Political Science, 35:1, 109-135

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.754683>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## WMD: The Career of a Concept

Ido Oren

University of Florida, USA

Ty Solomon

University of South Florida–St. Petersburg, USA

**Abstract** *The danger posed by “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) was the Bush administration’s chief justification for invading Iraq. Amid the din of the chorus that ceaselessly repeated this phrase in 2002–2003, hardly anyone stopped to ask: what is “WMD” anyway? Is it not a mutable social construct rather than a timeless, self-evident concept? Guided by Nietzsche’s view of the truth as a “mobile army of metaphors [and] metonyms . . . which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically,” we present a history of the metonym WMD. We describe how it was coined by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1937, and subsequently how its meaning was “transposed” and “enhanced” throughout Cold War arms negotiations, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and in US domestic law. We also discuss how, in the run-up to the Iraq war, “WMD” did not merely describe an Iraqi threat; it was rather “embellished poetically and rhetorically” in ways that produced and inflated the threat.*

The danger posed by “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) was the George W. Bush administration’s chief justification for invading Iraq. In the run-up to the March 2003 invasion, administration officials repeatedly told the American public that, as President Bush put it in a speech he delivered in January 2003 in Fort Hood, Texas,

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.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the invasion, however, the CIA’s Iraq Survey Group, which conducted a massive search for these weapons, failed to find them.<sup>2</sup> In January 2004 David Kay, who earlier resigned as head of the group, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “we were almost all wrong” about Iraq’s

---

We thank the journal’s referees and the many fellow scholars—too many to list here—who have commented on earlier versions of this article. We will be remiss, however, not to acknowledge a special debt to Benoit Pelopidas for his steadfast support and many helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> “President Rallies Troops at Fort Hood,” January 3, 2003, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030103.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 418; see also George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), p. 298.

WMD.<sup>3</sup> Eight months later the group's final report, signed by Kay's successor, Charles Duelfer, concluded that "Iraq had not possessed military-scale stockpiles of illicit weapons for a dozen years and was not actively seeking to produce them."<sup>4</sup>

The failure to discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has generated a heated debate between defenders (or mild critics) of the Bush administration, who characterized the WMD fiasco as an unintentional if serious "intelligence failure," and harsh critics, who charged that the administration deliberately "misrepresented the intelligence" about Iraq's WMD and "presented a case for war that turned out to be, in virtually every aspect, fraudulent."<sup>5</sup> Although the debate has gradually receded from the headlines, it continues to arouse passions. On the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, a testy verbal skirmish erupted on the set of the cable television talk show *Morning Joe* after one of the guests, PBS host Tavis Smiley, said that the Bush administration "lied" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.<sup>6</sup>

We seek not to adjudicate this debate but to expose its limits. Debaters of all stripes, including those who charged that the Bush administration lied to the American people, have treated "weapons of mass destruction" as if it were a self-evident, fixed concept. Both defenders and critics of the administration have implicitly presupposed, furthermore, that the truth about "weapons of mass destruction" consisted in correspondence between this concept and a factual reality independent of the concept. Not even the harshest critics of the administration's campaign to "sell" the war to the American people have stopped to ask: what does "WMD" mean anyway?<sup>7</sup> Is "WMD" not a contestable, changeable social construct more than a stable, timeless concept? Did the repeated uttering of this phrase during the run-up to war not rhetorically construct a grave Iraqi threat rather than merely describe it?

By failing to pose these questions, critics of the Bush administration have overlooked something important about the way in which the Iraq War was sold to the American people. The administration's campaign to sell the war to the public should not be understood as an effort to communicate facts about the realities of the Iraqi threat, facts whose inaccuracy the press failed to expose.<sup>8</sup> The campaign, we argue, rhetorically constructed a reality of an Iraqi danger as much as it (mis)represented such a reality. More specifically, the incessant incantation of the

<sup>3</sup> Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 434; see also James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Report Finds Iraq Was Minimal Weapons Threat in '03," *New York Times*, October 6, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), pp. 398, 19. For another biting critique of the "administration's subterfuge" see Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), p. 3. The notion that the fiasco resulted from a "a major intelligence failure" was the key conclusion of the Silberman-Robb Commission, a panel appointed by President Bush to investigate US intelligence capabilities regarding Iraq's WMD; see Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, p. 382.

<sup>6</sup> "Joe Scarborough and Tavis Smiley Argue About George W. Bush on 'Morning Joe,'" *Huffington Post*, September 12, 2011, < [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/12/joe-scarborough-and-tavis\\_n\\_958618.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/12/joe-scarborough-and-tavis_n_958618.html) >.

<sup>7</sup> Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*; Rich, *Greatest Story Ever Sold*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

phrase “weapons of mass destruction”—initially by administration officials and subsequently by the media and the public—successfully obscured the historically variable, ambiguous, and contested meanings of the concept, creating the illusion that WMD was a firm, stable, and self-evident signifier of a preexisting danger. Seen in this light, the problem with the American press was not that it failed to call the administration’s lies about WMD so much as that it reflexively echoed and amplified this vague phrase, thus partaking in its reification. Indeed, inasmuch as they, too, reflexively repeated the term WMD and failed to raise questions about its meaning and history, even the sharpest critics of the Iraq War contributed unwittingly to the stabilization and firming-up of this scare term, thus reinforcing the rhetorical construction of the Iraqi threat.

In this article, then, we search neither for the essence of “weapons of mass destruction” nor for concrete objects that “truly” correspond to this concept. Instead, we seek to trace the largely forgotten history of the concept and dispel the illusion that “WMD” has a stable, unambiguous, essential meaning.<sup>9</sup> Our exploration of the career of this concept is guided by Friedrich Nietzsche’s view—articulated in his essay on “Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”—that the truth is

A mobile army of metaphors, *metonyms*, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their picture and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>10</sup>

Following Nietzsche’s formulation, we analyze the metonym weapons of mass destruction as a “sum” of past political and social “human relations.”<sup>11</sup> We describe how this figure of speech was coined by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1937, how it was “transposed” by presidential science advisor Vannevar Bush in 1945, how it was “transposed” again and “enhanced” in United Nations (UN) disarmament negotiations in 1946–1948, how the WMD coin subsequently “lost [its] picture,” how in the 1980s—in contrast with the Bush administration’s later declarations that Iraq “used weapons of mass destruction”—the US government and media did *not* use this metonym to describe Iraq’s chemical attacks in Iran and Kurdistan, how the concept experienced a minor revival in the aftermath of Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and how it was “transposed” once more in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. We then analyze how “weapons of mass destruction” was “embellished poetically and rhetorically” in 2002–2003: how its condensation of diverse meanings into a single phrase, its reinforcement by other ominous figures of speech (“mushroom cloud”), its

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Bentley’s critique of essentialist understandings of WMD nicely dovetails with our analysis. See “The Long Goodbye: Beyond an Essentialist Construction of WMD,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 33:2 (2012), pp. 384–406.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, in Walter Kaufman (ed. and trans.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), pp. 46–47; emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), p. 233, defines a metonym as “a figure of speech that involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is... closely associated with it in some way, notably the substitution of effect [purported mass destruction] for cause [e.g., nuclear explosion; chemical reaction].”

transposition into an acronym, and especially its ceaseless repetition made the term “seem firm, canonical and obligatory” to the American people, creating the “illusion” that it was a straightforward referent of a factual truth about Iraq.

### **The Emergence, “Enhancement,” and “Transposition” of WMD, 1937–1945**

“Weapons of mass destruction” appears to have been coined by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In his 1937 Christmas day radio broadcast, excerpted by the *Times of London* on December 28, 1937, the Archbishop voiced

dismay of the fears, jealousies, and suspicions which have compelled nations . . . to pile up their armament. Who can think at this present time without a sickening of the heart of the appalling slaughter, the suffering, the manifold misery brought by war to Spain and to China? Who can think without horror of what another widespread war would mean, waged as it would be with all the new weapons of mass destruction?<sup>12</sup>

Although the Archbishop did not name specific weapons, his allusions to Spain and China—where the Nazi and Japanese air forces attacked population centers—suggest that he probably meant to include aerial bombs among the “new weapons of mass destruction.”

In the US press the term WMD would not be printed until November 1945, but its metonymical component, “mass destruction,” did appear, rarely, even before the Archbishop’s address. In the 1930s “mass destruction” was not primarily associated with weapons—twelve of the twenty-one *New York Times* articles that contained this term during the decade did not place it in the context of modern warfare.<sup>13</sup> During World War II the frequency of “mass destruction” in the American press increased somewhat and the term became predominantly associated with warfare. Initially, most of the *New York Times* articles that alluded to “mass destruction” did not tie it to particular weapons, but gradually a growing proportion of the references to this expression came to denote the effect of allied aerial bombing. For example, in November 1943 the *Times* reported on an air raid that resulted in the “mass destruction” of a factory in Austria.<sup>14</sup> Immediately after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 commentators and critics of the new weapon began to associate it with “mass destruction.” For example, thirty-four clergymen publicly appealed to President Truman to halt the production of the atomic bomb, which they characterized as “the technology of mass destruction.”<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leading atomic scientists advocated the creation of an international authority for the control of atomic energy, which they hoped would avert a US-Soviet atomic arms race. Their

<sup>12</sup> “Archbishop’s Appeal: Individual Will and Action,” *Times of London*, December 28, 1937.

<sup>13</sup> We use “article” as a generic category aggregating news reports, editorials, op-ed pieces, readers’ letters, and advertisements.

<sup>14</sup> “Plant in Austria Bombed to Ruins,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1943.

<sup>15</sup> “Truman is Urged to Bar Atom Bomb,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1945.

position was supported by several senior government officials, including Vannevar Bush, the government's chief scientific advisor. President Truman endorsed the idea of the international control of atomic energy but he declined to immediately approach the Soviet Union, preferring to discuss the idea with Britain and Canada first.<sup>16</sup>

On November 16, 1945 the American press prominently reported on a meeting of President Truman with Prime Ministers Clement Attlee of Britain and W.L. Mackenzie King of Canada, held in Washington the previous day. The *New York Times* printed the text of the declaration issued by the conferees while the paper's columnist Arthur Krock translated the declaration from diplo-speak into plain English. Krock paraphrased its crux as follows:

We propose that a special commission of the United Nations shall begin at once to plan international means for [controlling atomic energy]. The Commission should proceed in four steps: first, to set up an organization for the international exchange [of scientific information]; second, to devise workable controls that will insure the peaceful use of this information; third, to draw up a protocol by which all nations will agree to eliminate the atomic bomb and other *weapons of mass destruction* from their armament for all times; and, fourth, to suggest inspection and other safeguards which will really protect the states that comply from those which, if unpoliced, might not.<sup>17</sup>

This was the first time the *Times* (and, as far as we can ascertain, the US press) printed the metonym weapons of mass destruction. Notably, this term did not appear in the original text of the tripartite declaration; it was Krock's adaptation of the less graceful phrase "atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction."<sup>18</sup>

How did the allusion to "other major weapons" crop up in the declaration even though the express purpose of the conference was to coordinate atomic policy alone? In early November 1945, when Vannevar Bush complained to Secretary of State James Byrnes about the lack of adequate planning for the upcoming tripartite meeting, Byrnes asked Bush to draft a plan. Bush did so hastily and he subsequently co-drafted the declaration signed by President Truman and the two prime ministers.<sup>19</sup> According to his autobiography, Bush suggested inserting the words "and other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction" into the declaration, and his British counterpart "promptly agreed. We both thought that, while we were attempting to bring reason to bear on one terrible weapon, we might as well include another that could be equally terrible."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 247–253; see also Barton Bernstein, "Quest for Security: American Foreign Policy and International Control of Atomic Energy, 1942–1946," *Journal of American History* 60:4 (1974), pp. 1103–1144.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Krock, "In the Nation: 'In Other Words'—Truman, Attlee, King," *New York Times*, November 16, 1945; emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis, *US and the Origins of the Cold War*, p. 271.

<sup>19</sup> Vannevar Bush, *Pieces of the Action* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 296; see also Gaddis, *US and the Origins of the Cold War*, p. 270.

<sup>20</sup> Bush, *Pieces of the Action*, p. 297.

The “equally terrible” weapon type that Bush had in mind was biological.<sup>21</sup> Bush helped oversee secret wartime research into germ warfare, and in 1944 he tried unsuccessfully to promote within the government the idea of placing biological weapons under international control.<sup>22</sup> His fortuitous participation in the tripartite conference thus allowed him to turn this concern into official policy. Had the State Department engaged in methodical planning for the conference, it is unlikely that Bush would have had the opportunity to draft the American policy position, let alone slip into the tripartite declaration the words “other weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”

With the exception of Marquis Childs of the *Washington Post*—who noted that the new phrase was “particularly significant. It would surely cover the super-bomber”—commentators paid no immediate attention to the debut of “other weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”<sup>23</sup> Still, by inserting these words into a major official document Bush made it probable that the phrase would sooner or later be recycled in diplomatic negotiations. In Nietzsche’s terms, Bush can be said to have “enhanced” this figure of speech by introducing it into diplomatic discourse and to have “transposed” it from a term that might have become associated exclusively with nuclear weapons into a more open-ended expression. The *New York Times*, too, may be credited with “transposing” the phrase into the more graceful locution “weapons of mass destruction.”

### Continued “Transposition” and “Enhancement,” 1946–1948

In December 1945, at a conference of the “big three” foreign ministers held in Moscow, the Soviets accepted the plan—outlined in the Truman-Attlee-King communiqué—to call on the UN to establish a commission that would work toward eliminating “atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” The conferees apparently did not discuss the meaning of this phrase, and it was incorporated into the communiqué issued at the conclusion of the meeting.<sup>24</sup>

On January 24, 1946 the UN General Assembly voted to establish a commission to plan for international control of atomic energy. Secretary of State Byrnes appointed Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson to chair a committee to guide the US delegates to the nascent commission. Although its terms of reference alluded to “control of atomic energy and other weapons of possible mass destruction,” the final report submitted by Acheson’s committee in March 1946—the Acheson-Lilienthal report—focused exclusively on atomic energy. Its single mention of the “horrible power of mass destruction” referred strictly to atomic weapons.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Jeanne Guillemin, *Biological Weapons: From the Invention of State-Sponsored Programs to Contemporary Bioterrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 53, 58, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Marquis Childs, “Washington Calling: Freedom of Science,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 1945.

<sup>24</sup> “Text of Communiqué Issued by Big Three after the Moscow Conference,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1945; see also Bernstein, “Quest for Security,” pp. 1028–1029; and Gaddis, *US and the Origins of the Cold War*, p. 279.

<sup>25</sup> Gaddis, *US and the Origins of the Cold War*, p. 332; Bernstein, “Quest for Security,” pp. 1029–1032. The text of the report is available at <<http://www.learnworld.com/ZNW/LWText.Acheson-Lilienthal.html>>.

To help sell the international control of atomic energy to a skeptical US Congress, President Truman appointed Bernard Baruch—a former financier whose political contributions had earned him the esteem of Washington lawmakers—as ambassador to the UN Atomic Energy Commission. Reluctant to be a mere “messenger boy” for the Acheson-Lilienthal blueprint, Baruch proceeded to formulate his own plan.<sup>26</sup> The Baruch Plan incorporated the US military’s concern, conveyed to Baruch by General Dwight Eisenhower, that “To control atomic weapons, in which field we are pre-eminent, without provision for equally adequate controls of other weapons of mass destruction can seriously endanger national security.”<sup>27</sup> In presenting his plan to the UN Atomic Energy Commission in June 1946, Baruch declared that

before a country is ready to relinquish any winning weapons... It must have a guarantee of safety, not only against the offenders in the atomic area but against the illegal users of other weapons—bacteriological, biological, gas... If we succeed in finding a suitable way to control atomic weapons, it is reasonable to hope that we may also preclude the use of other weapons adaptable to mass destruction.<sup>28</sup>

The Soviet ambassador to the commission, Andrei Gromyko, countered with an alternative plan that, though it differed from Baruch’s on several key points, also contained references to “atomic weapons and all other similar weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>29</sup> But whereas Baruch, as noted above, associated such “other” weapons with “bacteriological, biological, gas” warfare, Gromyko left this category undefined.

In subsequent months, as tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were growing, negotiation sessions in the UN over atomic energy became increasingly acrimonious.<sup>30</sup> In one of these sessions, held at the UN Political and Security Committee on December 2, 1946, the issue of “other weapons of mass destruction” finally came to the fore after it had been “ignored” in previous months.<sup>31</sup> The American delegate, Senator Tom Connally of Texas, “insisted that any scheme for international control must include such weapons as jet planes, biological warfare, and poison gas, which, he pointed out, were not included in the Russian resolution.” Connally remarked that “the victims of poison gas or biological germs were just as dead as those killed by the bomb.” The British delegate, Sir Hartley Shawcross, supported Connally’s view that the scope of international control must be extended to non-atomic weapons. Noting that twenty million people died in the war even before the atomic bombing of Japan, Shawcross said it was “essential that we should have general reduction of all armaments and

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, “Quest for Security,” pp. 1032–1035.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, “Quest for Security,” p. 1036.

<sup>28</sup> “Baruch’s Speech at Opening Session of U.N. Atomic Energy Commission,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1946.

<sup>29</sup> “The Texts of the Principal Speeches on the Proposals to Control Atomic Energy,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1946.

<sup>30</sup> Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945–1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 189.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hamilton, “Molotov Says Veto Could Not Be Used in Arms Inspection,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1946.

prohibition of the most terrible... There is no longer safe ground for being sure that the atom bomb is the most terrible."<sup>32</sup>

The Soviet delegate, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinsky, reacted by suggesting that Connally's position was but a ploy to prolong America's monopoly over "the queen of horrors, the atom bomb." According to the *New York Times* Vishinsky said that "the most dangerous weapons [must be] taken up first... But he added that Senator Connally obviously misunderstood the Russians when he said the Soviet proposal spoke only of the atomic bomb." Vishinsky went on to state that "gas and bacteriological warfare had already been prohibited by international agreements... He said rockets, jet planes and other weapons of mass destruction were specifically covered" in the UN General Assembly resolution of January 24, 1946, which established the Atomic Energy Commission (in fact, the resolution referred to "other weapons adaptable to mass destruction" but it did not name specific weapons). Vishinsky added that his government favored "a general reduction of armaments in all countries, applying to all kinds, types and categories of weapons."<sup>33</sup>

The discussion of other weapons of mass destruction continued in subsequent days. On December 4, 1946 Shawcross reiterated Britain's position that the "actual abolition of the atomic bomb must not take place prior to an effective ban on other 'weapons of mass destruction.'" *New York Times* correspondent Thomas Hamilton commented that this British proposal may have been attributable to the fact that not "merely the atomic bomb, bacteriological warfare and long-distance rockets, but other and more fearsome weapons are thought to be on the offing... One particularly horrible possibility, it is thought, is that of using long-distance rockets to carry a ton of more of the particularly virulent bombs that scientists are now developing."<sup>34</sup> Although the following day Baruch distanced himself from the British demand, his counterpart in the UN Political and Security Committee, Senator Connally, continued to insist, much like Shawcross, that "the actual abolition of the atomic bomb must go 'hand in hand' with that of long-range rockets, bacteriological warfare, etc." Connally stated that when the United States forgoes its atomic weapon, "we want other nations to forego the use of other weapons of mass destruction—rockets, jet planes, etc." Surprisingly, Soviet Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov accepted the proposal to render the abolition of atomic weapons conditional upon the elimination of "other weapons of mass destruction," but the scope of this category remained undefined.<sup>35</sup>

Molotov's concession fell short of bridging the wide gulf separating the US and Soviet positions.<sup>36</sup> On December 30, 1946, the Atomic Energy Commission adopted the Baruch plan by a 10–0 vote, with the Soviet Union and Poland abstaining. Although Baruch regarded the vote as a personal victory, for the

---

<sup>32</sup> Frank S. Adams, "U.S. Wants All Weapons Brought Under Arms Control," *New York Times*, December 3, 1946.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, "Molotov Says Veto Could Not Be Used."

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Hamilton, "Molotov Accepts Curbs on All Arms," *New York Times*, December 7, 1946.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Baruch Plan it portended defeat since the dispute was merely transferred to the Security Council, where the Soviets could veto the American plan.<sup>37</sup>

After Baruch's "victory," disarmament talks continued in the UN for another two years without producing an agreement.<sup>38</sup> Because these talks were largely fruitless, diplomatic historians devoted relatively little attention to them. From our perspective, however, they are of considerable interest because the delegates continued to wrestle, from time to time, with the meaning of the concept "weapons of mass destruction."

In early 1947 the Soviet Union proposed that, in accordance with a December 14, 1946 General Assembly resolution calling for general disarmament, the Security Council appoint a commission to formulate plans for "the prohibition of atomic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as a reduction in the numerical strength and materiel of national armed forces."<sup>39</sup> The United States, however, objected to folding the talks over WMD into a general disarmament framework. American diplomats insisted that the Atomic Energy Commission "retain complete jurisdiction over control of all weapons of mass destruction," and that the issue of general disarmament be taken up by a separate commission.<sup>40</sup>

As the *New York Times* pointed out on February 1, 1947, it was widely understood that "apart from atomic bombs, weapons of mass destruction include bacteriological warfare and guided missiles," but "a more precise definition [was] required" in order to demarcate the jurisdiction of the Atomic Energy Commission from that of the disarmament commission.<sup>41</sup> The following day, the *Times* reported that

The lack of such a definition has come up repeatedly in [US delegate Warren] Austin's conferences with other Council members. The B-29 plane, used to drop the two atomic bombs on Japan, inflicted much greater loss of life with non-atomic bombs, it was noted. These talks have raised the further question whether carriers and battleships, and perhaps other components of the armed forces of the world, should be considered weapons of mass destruction.<sup>42</sup>

On February 12, 1947 the Security Council adopted a Soviet proposal for "a new commission to study arms reductions but with the American proviso that it should deal only with conventional arms and not with those already being dealt with by the Atomic Energy Commission." The *Times* explained that "In view of the assignment by the Assembly of all matters dealing with atomic and other major weapons of mass destruction to the Atomic Energy Commission, this second commission could naturally deal only with what the assembly resolution designates as 'minor' or conventional weapons of the pre-atomic

<sup>37</sup>Gaddis, *US and the Origins of the Cold War*, p. 334; see also Bernstein, "Quest for Security," pp. 1043–1044.

<sup>38</sup>Herken, *Winning Weapon*, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup>Thomas Hamilton, "U.S. Revising Stand for Atom Primacy," *New York Times*, February 1, 1947.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Hamilton, "U.S. Facing Rebuff on Atom Priority," *New York Times*, February 2, 1947.

<sup>41</sup>Hamilton, "U.S. Revising Stand."

<sup>42</sup>Hamilton, "U.S. Facing Rebuff."

age."<sup>43</sup> The council, however, defined neither "minor weapons" nor "weapons of mass destruction."

In summer 1947 the United States submitted to the new Commission on Conventional Armament a proposed definition of weapons of mass destruction: "Any instrument or invention capable of destroying life and property on the scale of a plague, a flood, a famine, or an earthquake." The American delegate, Franklin Lindsey, explained that this definition applied to the atomic bomb, radioactive materials, and deadly chemical and biological mixtures. He ruled out the inclusion of airplanes and warships in the WMD category because they were merely "carriers" of destructive weapons, not "producers" of destruction. Lindsey added that, if future weapon technologies become capable of causing destruction on the scale of the above-mentioned natural disasters, these weapons too should come under the jurisdiction of the Atomic Energy Commission.<sup>44</sup>

A few weeks later, the United States pressed for a resolution "whereby the Commission on Conventional Armament would eliminate from its consideration not only atomic weapons but all weapons of mass destruction, equivalent in effect to famine or earthquake," including "radioactive material, lethal chemical and biological weapons and 'any weapons developed in the future which have characteristics comparable in destructive effect to those of the atomic bomb or other weapons mentioned above.'" The Soviet delegate immediately voiced opposition to the resolution "on the ground that disarmament involving atomic weapons cannot be divorced from the scrapping of more conventional weapons such as battleships and rifles."<sup>45</sup>

The Soviets got their wish of linking atomic and conventional disarmament in late 1948, when the moribund Atomic Energy Commission was fused with the Commission on Conventional Armament into the "United Nations Disarmament Commission." Still, it is notable that, a moment before its death, the Commission on Conventional Armament voted to adopt the American definition of WMD. In August 1948 the commission resolved that "weapons of mass destruction should be defined to include atomic explosive weapons, radioactive material weapons, lethal chemical and biological weapons, and any weapons developed in the future which have characteristics comparable in destructive effects to those of the atomic bomb or other weapons mentioned above."<sup>46</sup> Although this resolution had no immediate practical consequences—the Soviets blocked its submission to the Security Council—its passage marked a closure, however fleeting and arbitrary, of the fitful UN debate concerning the meaning of WMD.

In recapitulation, after the atomic bombing of Japan Vannevar Bush "transposed" the term mass destruction by associating it with "other" non-atomic weapons and "enhanced" it by slipping the term into the Truman-Attlee-

<sup>43</sup> "Disarmament Meets a Test," *New York Times*, February 13, 1947; see Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> A.M. Rosenthal, "U.S. Asks One Body Curb Worst Arms," *New York Times*, August 21, 1947.

<sup>45</sup> George E. Jones, "Soviet Balks Vote on U.S. Arms Plan," *New York Times*, September 6, 1947.

<sup>46</sup> Richard M. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 144; see also Seth W. Carus, *Defining "Weapons of Mass Destruction,"* Occasional Paper 4, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Washington, DC, 2006), p. 20; and Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, p. 104.

King declaration. But the meaning of “other weapons adaptable to mass destruction” remained contested in the ensuing disarmament negotiations in the UN. To the extent that the participants or commentators bothered to define it, they associated it variously with “bacteriological, biological, gas” (Baruch), “rockets, jet planes” (Vishinsky), “bacteriological warfare and long-distance rockets, [and] . . . particularly virulent bombs” (Thomas Hamilton, *New York Times*), “long-range rockets, bacteriological warfare, etc” (Shawcross), “rockets, jet planes, etc.” (Connally), “bacteriological warfare and guided missiles” (*New York Times*), “the B-29 plane . . . carriers and battleships” (*New York Times*), and “any instrument . . . capable of destroying life and property on the scale of a plague, a flood, a famine, or an earthquake” (Austin). Finally, the Commission on Conventional Armament—in a spark of life punctuating its otherwise moribund state—resolved that the WMD category included atomic, radiological, biological, and chemical weapons, as well as future weapons capable of comparable destruction. This resolution constituted a significant “transposition” and (re-)“enhancement” of “weapons of mass destruction” for it made it likely that, should arms reduction talks be revived, the resulting draft treaties would reproduce this metonym.

### How the Coin Lost its Picture: “WMD” During the Cold War

The term WMD was indeed replicated in several arms treaties concluded during the Cold War. Nearly all these treaties, however, (let alone major arms control treaties that did not mention WMD—for example, the 1972 SALT I and Anti-Ballistic Missile treaties) focused on nuclear weapons; the phrase “other WMD” was tacked onto their texts largely as formality.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, it seems that even as the insertion of “WMD” into arms control agreements kept this coin of speech in circulation within the US defense bureaucracy, government officials sometimes deliberately sought to blur the “picture” emblazoned on the coin by the UN in 1948. For example, at a high-level 1963 meeting dedicated to the Outer Space Treaty, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze “indicated that DOD did not want a clear definition of WMD” included in the treaty because such a definition would foreclose the option of placing in orbit small anti-satellite nuclear weapons.<sup>48</sup> At other times, US officials were unable to provide a precise definition of WMD even when they genuinely intended to do so. During the 1967 Senate hearing on the Outer Space Treaty, when chief US negotiator Arthur Goldberg was asked by Senator J. William Fulbright to specify “the other weapons of mass destruction,” Goldberg replied: “Bacteriological, any type of weapons which could lead to the same type of catastrophe that a nuclear weapon could lead to.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Hymans, “The Roots of the Washington Threat Consensus,” in Betty Glad and Chris J. Dolan (eds), *Striking First: The Preventive War Doctrine and the Reshaping of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 38. See the texts of the 1967 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America, <<http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/opanal/text/index.html>>; the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, <<http://www.state.gov/t/ac/trt/5181.htm>>; the 1971 Seabed Treaty, <<http://www.state.gov/www/global/arms/treaties/seabed1.html#2>>; the 1979 SALT II Treaty <<http://www.state.gov/t/ac/trt/5195.htm>>; and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention <<http://www.state.gov/t/ac/trt/4718.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> Carus, *Defining “Weapons of Mass Destruction,”* pp. 22–23.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Goldberg thus omitted three elements of the definition adopted by the UN: radioactive material weapons, lethal chemical weapons, and future weapons capable of causing comparable destruction.

If American foreign policy specialists did not always recognize the precise contours of the picture inscribed on “WMD” by the UN, it should not be surprising that for the general public the picture, indeed the very coin itself, was being “lost” altogether. As Figure 1 shows, the frequency of *New York Times* articles mentioning “weapons of mass destruction” fell markedly during the Cold War.<sup>50</sup>

Not only had the use of “WMD” by the American press become increasingly infrequent, but on those occasions in which it *had* appeared in the press, the phrase was only rarely associated with specific weapons other than nuclear arms. Consider, for example, the nine articles in which the *New York Times* printed “WMD” in 1958. Only one of them contained an explicit reference to chemical and biological weapons. The other eight articles either mentioned no specific weapon systems or placed WMD in the context of nuclear weapons alone. For instance, on March 8, 1958 the *Times* published the text of a note from Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin to President Eisenhower, in which Bulganin pointed out that “it [was] not the Soviet Union that first started to manufacture atomic weapons or was the first to use these weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, all four *New York Times* articles that mentioned WMD in 1975 did so in the context of the nuclear arms race; only one of these articles made a passing reference to chemical and bacteriological weapons.

### *Two Curious Absences*

As Michel Foucault explained in his commentary on Nietzsche, the genealogical investigation of concepts requires not only the patient excavation of “the different scenes where they engaged in different roles”; genealogy “must define even those instances when [these concepts] are absent.”<sup>52</sup> During the Cold War, the concept WMD was absent, first, from discussions of America’s own armaments. US officials almost never referred to America’s chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons as “WMD.” In those years the phrase “American (or US, or America’s) weapons of mass destruction” never appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Wall Street Journal*.

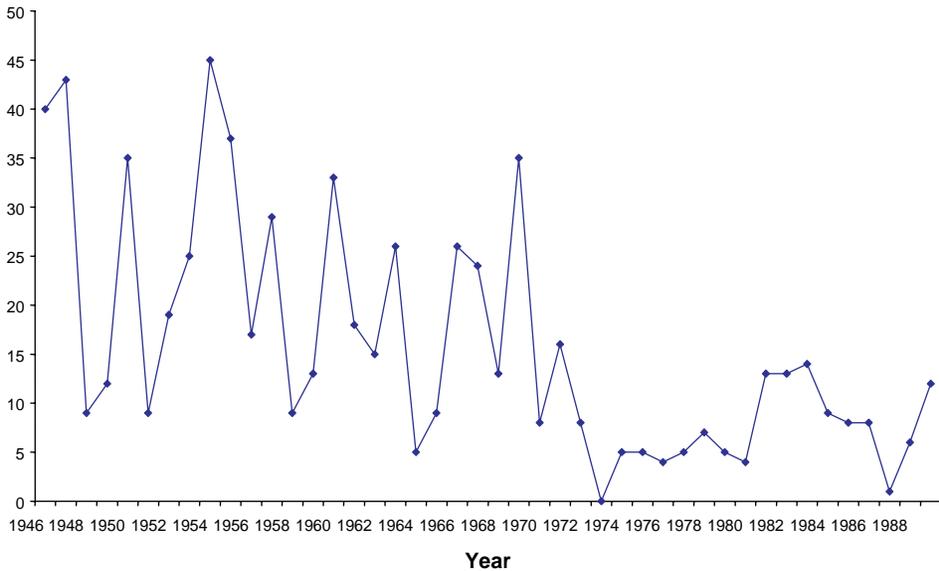
Second, during the Cold War the concept WMD was absent from reporting on, and public discussions of, instances in which gas was undoubtedly used in warfare, including the widespread use of riot control agents and herbicides by the United States in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> Although the US government insisted that tear gases

<sup>50</sup> The data were generated from the archives of the *New York Times* online at <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. A similar trend is evident in the *Washington Post*.

<sup>51</sup> “The Text of the Latest Letter from Bulganin to Eisenhower,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1958.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 76.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan B. Tucker, *War of Nerves: Chemical Warfare from World War I to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), p. 223; see also James Joyner, “Vietnam War,” in Eric Crodgy, James J. Wirtz, and Jeffrey Larsen (eds), *Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Encyclopedia of Worldwide Policy, Technology, and History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), p. 320.



**Figure 1.** Frequency of “weapons of mass destruction” in the *New York Times* 1946–1989

and defoliants were not true chemical weapons, critics of the war charged that the usage of such chemical agents *was* prohibited by international law.<sup>54</sup> Judging from the coverage of the controversy by the *New York Times* (which published well over one hundred articles on this issue between 1960 and 1975), the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, the phrase WMD was entirely absent not only from the official discourse of the US government but also from the often-heated pronouncements of its critics. Even Soviet diplomats—who frequently accused the United States of “using poison gas” or “violat[ing] international law by using chemicals”—were never reported to have charged that the United States employed “weapons of mass destruction” in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, the concept WMD was absent from reporting on the use of poison gas by the Egyptian air force in the Yemen even as these chemical bombings killed hundreds of Yemeni civilians.<sup>56</sup> Between 1962 and 1968 the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* together published more than two dozen news stories and commentaries on Egypt’s lethal use of gas in the Yemen. None of them mentioned “weapons of mass destruction.”

Most strikingly, in contrast with the Bush administration’s statements in 2002–2003 that the Iraqis “used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people,” the phrase WMD was entirely absent from contemporaneous reporting on Saddam Hussein’s use of poison gas against Iran and the Kurds in the 1980s. From the summer of 1982 through the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 Iraqi forces launched repeated

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Graham Jr, *Disarmament Sketches: Three Decades of Arms Control and International Law* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), pp. 22–25.

<sup>55</sup> First quotation: “Washington Rebutts Poison Gas Charge,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1963; second quotation: “Soviet Assails U.S. on War Chemicals,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1968.

<sup>56</sup> Tucker, *War of Nerves*, pp. 190–192.

chemical attacks against Iranian combatants. In late 1987 the Iraqi army began a chemical warfare campaign against hundreds of villages and towns in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq; the most devastating of these attacks targeted the town of Halabja in March 1988, killing between two thousand and five thousand people.<sup>57</sup> The Iraqi use of poison gas, particularly the bombing of Halabja, garnered a fair amount of coverage in the American press. On March 24, 1988, for example, the headline of a front page story in the *Washington Post* read "Poison Gas Attack Kills Hundreds."<sup>58</sup> In 1988 alone, the *Times*, the *Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* published fifty-three articles that mentioned or discussed Iraqi chemical attacks in Kurdistan. None of these articles, much like earlier press reporting on the Iraqi use of gas against the Iranian military, mentioned "weapons of mass destruction."

In sum, during the Cold War "weapons of mass destruction" became increasingly scarce in American public discourse and, to the extent that this metonym was mentioned in the press, it was associated with nuclear weapons more than biological, chemical, or radiological ones. The phrase was absent from media accounts of chemical warfare in Vietnam, Yemen, and, most remarkably, Iraq. Thus, during the Cold War it was unlikely that even a highly attentive US citizen could have given a specific description of "weapons of mass destruction" consistent with the UN's official definition of the term. By the 1980s, as it became rare and as the "picture" emblazoned on it by the UN had faded, "WMD" came to "matter only as metal," if it mattered at all, "no longer as [a] coin."<sup>59</sup>

### "WMD" After the Cold War: Simultaneous Re-Enhancement and Transposition

In the 1990s the incidence of "WMD" in US discourse on foreign affairs rose appreciably. The metonym became increasingly associated with efforts to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 687, which prohibited Iraq from possessing nuclear, biological, and chemical arms. But even as this association re-"enhanced" the meaning attached to "WMD" by the UN in 1948, and even as the circulation of this coin in foreign policy talk was growing (or perhaps *because* of its growing frequency), "WMD" had seeped into the discourse of *domestic* US law, where its meaning was "transposed" again.

#### *Re-Enhancement*

As Jacques Hymans pointed out, the perception that the proliferation of "WMD" in the Third World critically endangered the United States was not invented by the George W. Bush administration. This threat assessment was embraced by the Clinton administration in the 1990s and its origins are traceable to the days of the George H.W. Bush presidency. Whereas during the Cold War arms control efforts focused largely on the US-Soviet nuclear competition, the winding down of the superpower conflict gave the US arms control community an opportunity to pursue a more expansive agenda, which prominently called for chemical and biological disarmament throughout the developing world. The arms controllers

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 249–259, 268–272, 279–282.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "Poison Gas Attack Kills Hundreds," *Washington Post*, March 24, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 47.

began to use the term WMD interchangeably with biological and especially chemical weapons.<sup>60</sup> The adoption of this locution had the rhetorical effect of dramatizing the menace posed by chemical weapons and delegitimizing these weapons.

Ironically, as Richard Price demonstrated, in their quest to delegitimize the possession of chemical weapons by developing countries, arms controllers were able to seize on, and invert, the rhetoric of Third World leaders themselves, especially Saddam Hussein.<sup>61</sup> During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi officials occasionally sought to deter Iran by making a veiled analogy between chemical weapons and the atomic bomb. In 1982, for example, an Iraqi diplomat stated that "Iraq will use a new secret weapon of mass destruction if the Iranians launch a major offensive on the border."<sup>62</sup> When the war ended, Saddam Hussein re-directed the rhetoric of the "poor man's atomic bomb" against Israel. In April 1990 he warned Israel that "Whoever threatens us with the atomic bomb, we will annihilate him with the dual [binary] chemical."<sup>63</sup> The following month "Mr. Hussein warned again that he would respond to any Israeli use of weapons of mass destruction against his country by using comparable weapons against Israel."<sup>64</sup> After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 Iraqi leaders employed similar language to deter the United States from attacking Iraq. For example, an Iraqi diplomat declared that "we possess very destructive chemical weapons and we will use them if attacked."<sup>65</sup>

American leaders replied in kind, reinforcing the rhetorical conflation of chemical and nuclear weapons. In August 1990 President Bush declared that "the use of chemical weapons . . . would be intolerable and would be dealt with very, very severely," while Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney later warned that "were Saddam Hussein foolish enough to use weapons of mass destruction, the US response would be overwhelming and it would be devastating."<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, although George H.W. Bush, unlike the administration of his son in 2002–2003, did not cite the danger of Iraq's "WMD" as the chief justification for the Gulf War, the elder Bush nonetheless created the language that would later be adopted by the Clinton administration and be used with a vengeance by the George W. Bush administration. In November 1990 President Bush, glossing over the past reluctance of his administration to denounce Iraq's use of poison gas, depicted Saddam Hussein as a "Dictator who gassed his own people, innocent women and children, unleashing chemical weapons of mass destruction . . . those who measure the timetable for Saddam's atomic program in years, may be seriously underestimating the . . . gravity of the threat."<sup>67</sup> Several days later Bush said that Saddam was "a dangerous dictator all too willing to use force, who has weapons of mass destruction, and is seeking new ones."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Hymans, "Roots of the Washington Threat Consensus," p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> Price, *Chemical Weapons Taboo*, ch. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Cowell, "Iraq Chief, Boasting of Poison Gas, Warns of Disaster if Israelis Strike," *New York Times*, April 3, 1990.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Cowell, "Iraq Takes Harsh Line at Meeting," *New York Times*, May 29, 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Price, *Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 148.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> "Excerpts from Speech By Bush at Marine Post," *New York Times*, November 23, 1990.

<sup>68</sup> "Excerpts from President's News Conference on Crisis in Gulf," *New York Times*, December 1, 1990.

This official US rhetoric combined with Iraq's boasting of its "very destructive chemical weapons" and with the adoption of the locution WMD by advocates of biological and chemical disarmament to constitute a revival and, in Nietzsche's terms, a re-"enhancement" of the picture of WMD painted by the UN in 1948. UN Security Council Resolution 687 of April 3, 1991, which set the terms of the Gulf War ceasefire, firmed up the re-enhanced picture when its preamble acknowledged "the threat all weapons of mass destruction pose to peace and security in the area and of the need to work towards the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free of such weapons." The resolution mandated the unconditional destruction of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons and it banned Iraq from possessing such weapons, as well as nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, in the future.<sup>69</sup> Resolution 687 also provided for the creation of a UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) to "carry out on-site inspection of Iraq's biological, chemical, and missile capabilities."<sup>70</sup>

The emergence of the metonym WMD in the rhetoric surrounding the Gulf War and the insertion of the phrase into resolution 687 made it likely that this revived coin would continue to circulate in US media coverage of foreign affairs should the process of disarming Iraq drag on. And indeed, as Figure 2 illustrates, the incidence of the term in the American press rose significantly in the 1990s (even as it came nowhere near the saturation levels it would reach in 2002–2003).<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, most of the references to "WMD" were in the context of Iraq—that country was mentioned in 895 (73%) of the 1271 *New York Times* articles that referred to "WMD" in the 1990s. The presence of "WMD" in the media and the association of the phrase with Iraq became especially intense in 1998, when a series of confrontations between the Iraqi regime and UNSCOM's inspectors culminated in a massive US and British bombing campaign against Iraq.<sup>72</sup> In that year alone, the *New York Times* published 346 articles that contained "WMD," 282 (81%) of which referred to Iraq. Moreover, in his 1998 State of the Union Address President Clinton dusted off the rhetorical practice initiated by his predecessor of substituting "WMD" for "chemical weapons" to allude to Iraq's past use of poison gas. Addressing Saddam Hussein, Clinton said that "you have used weapons of mass destruction before. We are determined to deny you the capacity to use them again."<sup>73</sup> The following month Secretary of Defense William Cohen similarly denounced Hussein for having "use[d] weapons of mass destruction against his own people."<sup>74</sup>

It is clear, then, that in the 1990s foreign policy professionals, though they were probably unaware of the UN's 1948 resolution defining WMD,<sup>75</sup> have had a

<sup>69</sup> Tucker, *War of Nerves*, p. 310.

<sup>70</sup> The text of resolution 687 is posted at <<http://www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/sres/sres0687.htm>>.

<sup>71</sup> The data for Figure 2 were generated by using the Factiva.com search engine.

<sup>72</sup> Tucker, *War of Nerves*, p. 357.

<sup>73</sup> "Transcript of the State of the Union Message From President Clinton," *New York Times*, January 28, 1998.

<sup>74</sup> "Standoff with Iraq; War of Words: The Administration, Its Critics and Questions of Moral Right," *New York Times*, February 19, 1998. See also Hymans, "Roots of the Washington Threat Consensus," p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> According to William Safire, "Most arms control buffs think [WMD] is probably a Russian term." See William Safire, "On Language: Weapons of Mass Destruction," *New York Times*, April 19, 1998.

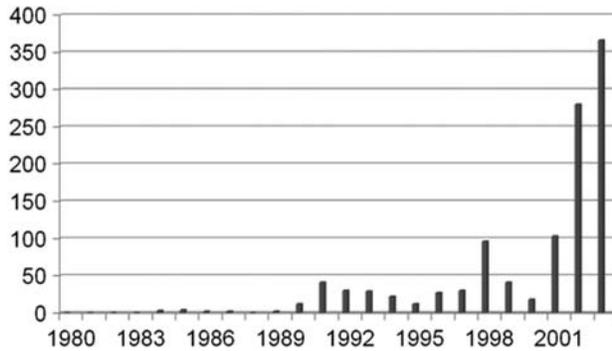


Figure 2. Frequency of "weapons of mass destruction" in the *Wall Street Journal*, 1980–2003

picture of "WMD" in their heads that more or less mirrored the UN's definition. To the extent that this picture has registered in the mind of the general public, however, the resolution of the picture appeared to have been far lower than that of the image harbored by foreign policy experts. In November 1997 *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."<sup>76</sup> A few months later William Safire, too, felt compelled to explain this shorthand in his "On Language" column. Safire was prompted by a reader who observed that "Weapons of mass destruction has become the stock phrase in describing Saddam Hussein's threat." "Is this some sort of shorthand," the reader asked, "for 'chemical and biological agents'? Does it include 'delivery systems' like missiles, or exclude weapons everyone else has, like conventional bombs? And where does this infectious phrase come from?"<sup>77</sup> The reader's question suggests that, as the tensions surrounding UNSCOM's inspections were mounting in 1998, "WMD" was becoming increasingly present in the consciousness of the American public (if not nearly as ever-present as it would become in 2003—in that year the frequency of the phrase in the *New York Times* almost matched its cumulative frequency during the entire decade of the 1990s). At the same time, however, the reader's question, and the fact that Safire chose to address it in his column, indicated that the meaning of the phrase remained fuzzy and that "WMD" may have entered the American mind as a "stock phrase" depicting a general perception of Iraqi menace more than a high-resolution facsimile of specific military hardware. The fact that as late as July 2003, after months in which the term WMD ceaselessly reverberated through the media, an editor in the *Washington Post* still saw fit to include the question "what are 'weapons of mass destruction'?" in a Q&A-style "update" on Iraq, is another indication that the minds of many Americans contained no specific, high-resolution image of the concept.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Alter, "Why This is Not a Drill," *Newsweek*, November 17, 1997.

<sup>77</sup> Safire, "On Language: Weapons of Mass Destruction."

<sup>78</sup> "Fighting in Iraq; the Big Story; an Occasional Look at What Everyone is Talking About," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2003.

*Transposition*

Perhaps one reason why even a seasoned commentator like Jonathan Alter “didn’t know” the meaning of “WMD” was that, even as the UN’s definition of the phrase became embedded in the minds of foreign policy bureaucrats, other parts of the federal government borrowed this metonym and stretched its definition considerably. This “transposition” occurred in the context of growing national alarm over violent crime, which prompted Congress to pass the massive “Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.”<sup>79</sup> President Clinton campaigned successfully for including in this law a ban on semi-automatic assault rifles, which Clinton repeatedly dubbed “weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>80</sup>

Notwithstanding Clinton’s rhetoric, the crime act did not refer to the banned rifles as “WMD.” Still, this phrase did somehow enter another section of the vast bill. Section 60023, subsequently inserted as section 2332a into Title 18, Part 1, Chapter 113B of the US Criminal Code, was titled “Weapons of Mass Destruction” and it outlawed the use, attempt, or conspiracy to use such weapons against any person or federal property in the United States, as well as against US nationals or federal property overseas.<sup>81</sup> Curiously, the definition of “WMD” provided by this piece of legislation was far broader than the common definition of the term in national security discourse. According to section 2332a, “‘weapons of mass destruction’ means” not only chemical, biological, and radioactive weapons (the words “nuclear” or “atomic” are curiously absent), but also “any destructive device as defined by section 921 of this title.” Section 921, in turn, defines “destructive devices” as “any explosive, incendiary or poison gas—bomb, grenade, rocket having a propellant charge of more than four ounces, missile having an explosive charge of more than one-quarter ounce, mine, or device similar to any of the devices described in the preceding clauses.” Additionally, the category “destructive device” includes any weapon which may “expel a projectile . . . and which has any barrel with a bore of more than one half-inch in diameter.” Thus, whereas the common understanding of “WMD” in foreign policy officialdom in the 1990s (which approximated the UN’s 1948 definition of the concept) distinguished between “WMD” and “conventional” armament, the Violent Crime Act of 1994 obliterated this distinction.

It was not long before federal prosecutors began pressing “WMD” charges against terrorists suspected of using “destructive devices” such as explosives or grenades. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who in 1995 detonated an ammonium nitrate truck bomb in front of the federal building in Oklahoma City, were charged with the use of, and conspiracy to use, weapons of mass destruction.<sup>82</sup> Richard Reid, who tried in 2001 to detonate a “shoe bomb” on a

<sup>79</sup> Adam Clymer, “Decision in the Senate: The Overview,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1994.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Wines, “Clinton Renewing Push for Assault Rifle Ban,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1994; see also “Clinton Campaigns for Weapons Ban in Letter to Hunters,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1994.

<sup>81</sup> The text of the 1994 crime act is posted at <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-in/query/z?c103:H.R.3355.ENR>>.

<sup>82</sup> The text of the indictment is posted at <<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/mcveighindictment.html>>.

commercial airliner, pled guilty to a WMD charge.<sup>83</sup> And as Attorney General John Ashcroft announced in 2004, two Colombian suspects were indicted by US prosecutors on WMD charges for hurling hand grenades into two Bogota restaurants, resulting in the injury of five Americans.<sup>84</sup> Thus, by inserting an expansive definition of “WMD” into US criminal law, Congress made it possible for the Attorney General to discover WMD in Colombia at the same time that other federal agencies were despairing of finding the banned weapons in Iraq.

The “extensive reliance” of federal prosecutors on the WMD section of the anti-crime legislation was not confined to terrorism cases.<sup>85</sup> In 2006, for example, a federal judge sentenced a young man from Pennsylvania to four years and ten months in prison after the man pled guilty to charges that included the “use of a weapon of mass destruction.”<sup>86</sup> As the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, the man was unhappy with a penis enlargement surgery he underwent in Chicago. He built a “bomb out of black gunpowder, a carbon dioxide cartridge, a nine-volt battery, a model rocket igniter, and dental floss.” Shortly after mailing the bomb to the Chicago surgeon the man called the police to confess his crime. The authorities intercepted the package and “used a water cannon from a fire truck to disarm it.” As the man’s attorney complained, because the prosecutors charged his client with using a WMD, he faced a harsher sentence than he would have faced had he been charged with mailing a letter bomb. “You shouldn’t group this guy,” the lawyer protested, “with people who drive trunk loads of explosives to buildings or gather anthrax or do things for political reasons.”<sup>87</sup> Or with Saddam Hussein, he might have added.

Foucault argued that investigating the “descent” of a concept entails the discovery of “the myriad events through which” this concept was formed and transformed, including the historical “accidents, the minute deviations” that shaped the concept.<sup>88</sup> If the slipping of “WMD” into federal law in 1994 appears to have been an “accident”—the law enforcement community did not offer a rationale for the term’s definition and no discussion of it took place<sup>89</sup>—the subsequent adoption of this concept by state legislatures resulted in “minute deviations” that sometimes extended the concept beyond its already broad federal definition. In recent years at least eighteen states have passed legislation criminalizing “weapons of mass destruction.” While some of these state laws basically duplicated the language of the US Criminal Code, other states adopted definitions that deviated from the federal code in minute but significant ways. For example, Florida Statute 790.166 broadens the federal definition of chemical weapons. If US law describes a WMD as “any weapon that is designed or

<sup>83</sup> Pam Belluck, “Unrepentant Shoe Bomber Sentenced to Life,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2003.

<sup>84</sup> “Second FARC Terrorist Indicted for 2003 Grenade Attack on Americans in Colombia,” US Department of Justice news release, October 28, 2004, <[http://justice.gov/opa/pr/2004/October/04\\_crm\\_724.htm](http://justice.gov/opa/pr/2004/October/04_crm_724.htm)>.

<sup>85</sup> Carus, *Defining “Weapons of Mass Destruction,”* p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> “Botched Penis Surgery Ends in Mail-Bomb to Doc,” *Associated Press*, November 22, 2006, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15849599/>>.

<sup>87</sup> John Shiffman, “Unhappy over Surgery, He Now Faces Prison,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” p. 81.

<sup>89</sup> Carus, *Defining “Weapons of Mass Destruction,”* p. 32.

intended to cause death or serious bodily injury through the release, dissemination, or impact of toxic or poisonous chemicals, or their precursors," the Florida statute stretches the definition to include "any device or object that is designed or intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to any human or animal, or severe emotional or mental harm to any human, through the release, dissemination, or impact of toxic or poisonous chemicals, or their precursors."<sup>90</sup>

Minute though this textual deviation might have been, it seems to have touched the life of one hapless Floridian. As the *Gainesville Sun* reported in 2006, the man was arrested after he was "accused of rigging a 'weapon of mass destruction' to spew hazardous substances into the Café Risqué Adult Super Center in Waldo." After neighbors "noticed a liquid leaking through a door of the business," the Sheriff's deputies "discovered someone had set two gallon-sized jugs of what appeared to be a corrosive material on the business' air conditioner. A water hose was set up to push water into the jugs, and another hose fed the substance into the building." The suspect "told an investigator that the substance was a mixture of swamp water, yeast, laundry soap and rotten eggs that he allowed to ferment for about a week." The judge released the suspect on his own recognizance.<sup>91</sup>

The wide discrepancy between "WMD" *qua* an existential threat to America's security and the concurrent association of the term with a primitive mail bomb, or with a "mixture of swamp water, yeast, laundry soap and rotten eggs," powerfully attests to the historically contingent and contestable meaning of this concept.

### How "WMD" Was "Embellished Poetically and Rhetorically" in 2002–2003

In this section we analyze the most momentous chapter in the history of "weapons of mass destruction" to date—the run-up to the Iraq War, when this phrase became the staple of the Bush administration's campaign to sell the war to the American people. We argue that the administration's claim that Iraq had (or used) WMD should be understood not as a (true or false) factual description of an Iraqi threat but rather as a rhetorical mode of constructing and inflating such a threat. More specifically, the employment of the metonym weapons of mass destruction by the administration and the press "embellished" the Iraqi threat "poetically and rhetorically" in four ways: condensation (of diverse meanings), reinforcement (by other ominous figures of speech), abbreviation ("WMD"), and, most significantly, repetition. Embellished by these rhetorical practices "WMD" produced a generalized sense of a grave Iraqi threat that many Americans readily came to see as "firm, canonical, and obligatory."<sup>92</sup>

#### *Condensation*

To highlight the dangerous character of the Iraqi regime, US officials made frequent references to the Iraqi chemical attacks against Iran and the Kurds in the 1980s. In describing the attacks, these officials alternated between stating that Iraq

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix D; emphases added.

<sup>91</sup> Alice Wallace, "Arrest Made Over Rigged Device at Waldo Sex Shop," *Gainesville Sun*, December 6, 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 47.

used “poison gas” and declaring that, to quote President Bush again, the Iraqis “used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people.”

As we discussed earlier, the term “mass destruction” became identified with atomic weapons immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In subsequent decades, this identification remained constant and unchallenged even as the association between “mass destruction” and other types of weapons has been fluid, contested, and often tenuous. The Bush administration’s practice of interchanging chemical weapons and “WMD” can be interpreted, then, as an attempt to fix in the public’s mind a heretofore unstable association between two disparate things or images: nuclear weapons and gas; Hiroshima and Halabja. The administration can be said, in other words, to have practiced rhetorical *condensation*: employing a single, compact verbal symbol (WMD) to unify a diversity of meanings (nukes; gas).<sup>93</sup>

As Nietzsche observed, however, “the unity of the word [WMD] does not guarantee the unity of the thing.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the disparate nature of chemical and nuclear weapons has been noted by prominent experts and observers. Steve Fetter concluded that chemical warheads are “hundreds or thousands of times less deadly than nuclear weapons.”<sup>95</sup> Similarly, weapons scientists Philip Morrison and Kosta Tsipis pointed out that nuclear and chemical weapons “are fundamentally different in terms of lethality, in the area they cover and over time; in the availability of measures that can protect against them.” Whereas a single nuclear weapon “can physically destroy an entire city instantaneously, kill hundreds of thousands of people, and leave lingering delayed radioactivity,” chemical weapons “do not destroy property” and, “unless used in very large quantities, [they] may cause hundreds, but probably not thousands, of deaths.”<sup>96</sup> Christopher Hitchens, who visited Halabja three years after the Iraqi air force gassed the town, noted that “A sustained day of carpet bombing with ‘conventional’ weapons would have been more lethal, as well as more annihilating.”<sup>97</sup>

Alas, the voices of these experts have been drowned out by the chorus of war rhetoric conducted by the administration. By repeatedly declaring that the Iraqis used (or had) “weapons of mass destruction” the Bush administration was able to effectively associate the Iraqi threat with nuclear weapons even as administration officials stopped short of claiming that Iraq actually had these terrible weapons.

<sup>93</sup> David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>94</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, in R.J. Hollingdale (trans.), *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Steve Fetter, “Ballistic Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction: What is the Threat? What Should be Done?,” *International Security* 16:1 (1991), p. 28; see also Matthew Meselson, “The Myth of Chemical Superweapons,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 47:3 (1991), pp. 12–15.

<sup>96</sup> Philip Morrison and Kosta Tsipis, “Rightful Names,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59:3 (2003), p. 77. More recently, a similar argument was made by Christian Enemark, “Farewell to WMD: The Language and Science of Mass Destruction,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 32:2 (2011), pp. 382–400.

<sup>97</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “‘WMD’ and ‘Inspectors’: Are Saddam’s Weapons Really Unconventional?,” *Slate*, December 26, 2002, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2076026>>.

The condensation of chemical and nuclear weapons into a single phrase thus served to rhetorically magnify the Iraqi threat.

### *Reinforcement*

Nietzsche's characterization of the truth as "a mobile *army* of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" suggests that no single figure of speech, powerful though it may be, can win a campaign to construct reality without rhetorical reinforcements.<sup>98</sup> The Bush administration indeed reinforced "WMD" with other ominous figures of speech, the most graphic of which was a double metaphor debuted by national security advisor Condoleezza Rice on September 8, 2002. Speaking on CNN, Rice warned that although the status of Iraq's nuclear program was not known with certainty, "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."<sup>99</sup> A month later, President Bush repeated this portentous phrase in a prime-time televised speech in Cincinnati.<sup>100</sup> General Tommy Franks, then head of US Central Command, similarly warned in November 2002 that failure to deal with Iraq might result in "the sight of the first mushroom cloud on one of the major population centers of this planet."<sup>101</sup> The reinforcement of the metonym WMD by the dramatic image of the "mushroom cloud," as well as by other powerful metaphors such as "axis of evil" and "outlaw regimes," helped firm up the public's fear that Iraq posed an existential threat to America's national security.

### *Abbreviation*

The third rhetorical practice that served to embellish "weapons of mass destruction" in 2002–2003 was the transposition of this flabby phrase 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.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, as the war approached, the acronym became so ubiquitous that reporters and commentators no longer felt compelled to spell it out.

The rhetorical effect of abbreviation was lucidly dissected by Herbert Marcuse. In a "note on abridgment" he explained that abbreviations "may help to repress undesired questions." For example, substituting NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization represses "questions about the membership of Greece and Turkey." By the same token, "UN dispenses with undue emphasis on 'united' . . . AFL-CIO entombs the radical political differences that once separated the two

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 47; emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> A transcript of Rice's remarks is posted at <<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/08/iraq.debate/>>.

<sup>100</sup> "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat," October 7, 2002, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html>>.

<sup>101</sup> Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan, *All the President's Spin: George W. Bush, the Media, and the Truth* (New York: Touchstone, 2004), p. 154.

<sup>102</sup> The data for Figures 3 and 4 were generated by using the Factiva.com search engine. The category "major US news and business publications" 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."

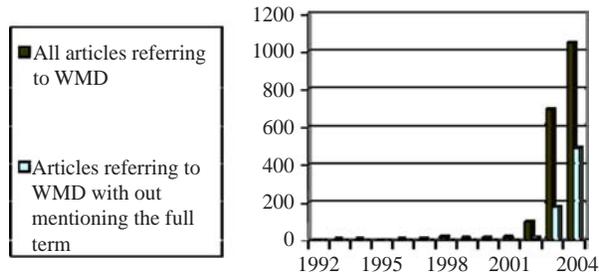


Figure 3. Frequency of the acronym WMD in major US publications

organizations.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, “WMD” buries even deeper than “weapons of mass destruction” the radical differences among the destructive capacities of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. The use of this acronym in the run-up to the Iraq War helped magnify the threat by “repress[ing] undesired questions” such as: can poison gas cause “mass destruction” even as gas cannot destroy property? Did the gas the Iraqi regime used against “its own people” actually cause “mass destruction”? Could the use of chemical weapons by Iraq 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.”<sup>104</sup>

### Repetition

The incessant repetition of “weapons of mass destruction” (or “WMD”) by the Bush administration and the unremitting bouncing of the phrase off the walls of the media’s echo chamber arguably constituted the most important way in which this metonym was “embellished poetically and rhetorically” in 2002–2003. Beginning with the January 2002 State of the Union address, the president and senior administration officials uttered this figure of speech multiple times in most of their public appearances.<sup>105</sup> In the CNN appearance in which she introduced the “mushroom cloud” metaphor, National Security Advisor Rice uttered “weapons of mass destruction” thirteen times. In the televised speech he gave in Cincinnati President Bush repeated the phrase eight times in twenty-six minutes. The President’s Fort Hood speech, though it was shorter, contained as many utterances of this expression, packing five of them into the short paragraph quoted at the beginning of this article. And Secretary of State Colin Powell alluded to “weapons of mass destruction” seventeen times in his (in)famous February 2003 address to the UN Security Council.<sup>106</sup>

The US press echoed and amplified the administration’s WMD rhetoric. As Figure 2 illustrates, the frequency with which the *Wall Street Journal* printed

<sup>103</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 94. We thank Dan Nexon for bringing Marcuse’s analysis to our attention.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> 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.

<sup>106</sup> “Full Text of Colin Powell’s Speech,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2003.

this phrase spiked dramatically in 2002 and 2003. Similarly, in the *New York Times* the frequency of articles in which this phrase appeared took off from sixty in 2000 to 524 in 2002 and 853 in 2003. And, as Figure 4 shows, in the twelve months preceding the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, the frequency of “weapons of mass destruction” in the American press increased tenfold. The newfound popularity of this phrase was evidenced by its selection by the American Dialect Society as the 2002 “Word of the Year”; that is, the year’s most “newly prominent or notable” vocabulary item.<sup>107</sup>

Freud wrote that “Repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure.”<sup>108</sup> Perhaps because of the pleasure inherently associated with the familiar, repetition is a common feature of a variety of cultural forms. The “repetition of a sound, syllable, word, phrase, stanza, or metrical pattern is a basic unifying device of all poetry.”<sup>109</sup> In advertising, repetition is “so obvious” that its significance is “sometimes neglected. A regular TV watcher may see the same ad tens of times or more, a magazine reader will see the same print again and again.”<sup>110</sup> And political campaigning, too, often exhibits repetition. One of the “ten rules of effective language” promulgated by political strategist Frank Luntz reads: “Repetition. Repetition. Repetition. Good language is like the Energizer Bunny. It keeps going... going... and going.”<sup>111</sup>

If repetition is a common feature of modern literature, advertising, and public relations (PR), it has long been central to another important cultural-literary form: religious ritual and liturgy. Modes of repetition in contemporary poetry and songwriting may have their roots in “primitive religious chants from all cultures,” which “develop[ed] into cadence and song.”<sup>112</sup> As linguist Julia Bamford observes, repetition remains “one of the outstanding features of the liturgies of religious ritual, as witnessed by the Bible... , the Book of Common Prayer, and the Talmud... All rely on repetition to create incantatory rhythms that render their meaning accessible to the widest possible range of readers and listeners.” Similarly, many prayers regularly recited by practicing Jews, Christians, or adherents of other religions, feature such incantatory rhythms. As Bamford further explains, the centrality of repetitive patterns in religious ritual “may derive from the ancient belief that repeating the name of an object captures the essence of the thing.” “The repetition of liturgical texts reifies” that which is being repeated.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Fear’s Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p. 29. “Newly prominent or notable” is from American Dialect Society, “What’s Your Word of the Year?” November 30, 2011, <<http://www.americandialect.org/2011/11>>. To put “WMD” in perspective, recent Word of the Year selections include “tweet” (2009), “app” (2010), and “occupy” (2011).

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1989), p. 94.

<sup>109</sup> Alex Preminger (ed.), *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 228.

<sup>110</sup> Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), p. 227.

<sup>111</sup> Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion 2007), p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> Preminger, *Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, p. 228.

<sup>113</sup> Julia Bamford, *You Can Say That Again: Repetition in Discourse* (Bologna, Italy: Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 2000), pp. 77–79.

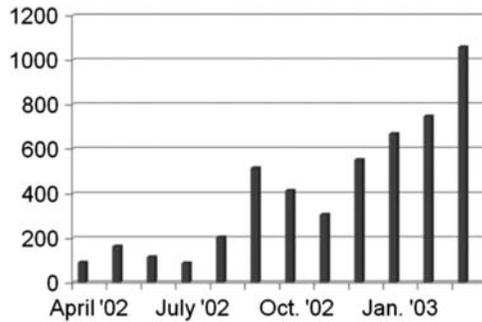


Figure 4. Monthly frequencies of “weapons of mass destruction” in major US publications during the run-up to war

Amid the “WMD” din that pervaded the US public arena at the time of the invasion of Iraq, there was but one perceptive commentator who saw the reverberation of the phrase through the media for the liturgical, reifying practice that it was. Writing three months after the invasion began, Michael Kinsley noted that, although the search for Iraq’s illicit weapons yielded no results, polls continued to show that “almost 9 out of 10 Americans still think Saddam had or was close to having WMD.” Debating whether the facts corresponded to the Bush administration’s claims that Iraq had WMD, Kinsley implied, was beside the point because

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.<sup>114</sup>

With Kinsley, we argue that the incessant incantation of “weapons of mass destruction” by the Bush administration, and the ricocheting of the phrase through the echo chamber of the mass media, emptied it of any specific meaning. Just as the repetitive structure of liturgical texts serves to divert the worshipper’s mind from his worldly situation and to affirm the axioms of his belief, so did the incantation of “WMD” make Americans take the existence of these weapons as an article of faith, distracting the American mind from the realities of the Middle East. And just as the chanting of a mantra lifts the chanter above material reality and promotes the actualization of the idea being uttered, so did the collective chant “weapons of mass destruction” rhetorically create the Iraqi threat as much as it referred to such a threat.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup>Michael Kinsley, “Low Opinion: Did Iraq Have Weapons of Mass Destruction? It Doesn’t Matter,” *Slate*, June 19, 2003, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2084602/>>.

<sup>115</sup>We develop a fuller theoretical account of this insight in Ido Oren and Ty Solomon, “Marketing Threats: How Securitization Can Be Performed in the Incantation of Ambiguous Phrases Such as ‘WMD,’” Unpublished Manuscript, August 2012.

## Conclusion

Figures of speech do not merely describe the truth, they constitute it. As Nietzsche taught us, when metaphors and metonyms experience “long use,” they become “worn out”; they “lose” specific meanings, or “pictures,” which used to be attached to them. The people who hear or speak them “forget” the unstable, variable history of these expressions, succumbing to the “illusion” that they are “firm, canonical” mirrors of factual truths.<sup>116</sup>

Guided by Nietzsche’s formulation, we showed that “weapons of mass destruction”—whose possession by Iraq was the chief justification for the Iraq War—lacked a self-evident, fixed meaning. The history of this metonym, far from being linear, continuous, or logical, was marked by twists and “transpositions,” periodic “enhancements” punctuated by curious absences and “losses,” and even accidents, such as the fortuitous participation of Vannevar Bush in drafting the 1945 Truman-Attlee-King communiqué, which resulted in the introduction of “other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction” into the diplomatic lexicon. To understand the Bush administration’s campaign to sell the Iraq War to American people, we ought to view it not as an attempt to communicate facts—accurate or not—about the threat of Iraq’s WMD. The campaign rather consisted in “embellishing” this metonym “poetically and rhetorically.” By using “weapons of mass destruction” to unify chemical and nuclear weapons, by abbreviating the phrase to repress undesired questions about the unity of these disparate weapons, by mixing it with other ominous figures of speech, and by incessantly repeating it, the Bush administration and the US press glossed over the erratic history of “weapons of mass destruction,” stabilized this metonym, and created the “illusion” that it was a “firm” representation of unquestionable Iraqi facts.<sup>117</sup>

What are the implications of our analysis for scholars and other citizens who may wish to resist future PR campaigns conducted by governments or other political actors? Our analysis suggests that opponents of the policies promoted by these campaigns should not concentrate on checking facts as much as on critiquing language tropes that purport to refer to facts. For example, rather than check whether a “Contract with America” is being honored by the politicians who proposed it, we should question the very usage and the political function of this trope; we should critically examine what this figure of speech *does* rather than focus exclusively on what it ostensibly describes. Similarly, when the government aggressively promotes a troop “surge”—in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere—we should critique the rhetorical effect of “the surge” as much as debate the effectiveness of the surge. We should ask, for instance, whether “surge” might have been selected because it evokes the image of sea waves—which are as sure to come down, quickly, as they are to go up—and/or because this word represses undesirable analogies to the Vietnam War more effectively than “escalation.”<sup>118</sup>

If we fail to pay sufficient attention to the rhetorical dimension of future political PR campaigns, we are bound to repeat the errors of, and hence be as ineffective as, the critics of the Bush administration’s campaign to sell the Iraq War

<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Jack Stripling, “Words of War: Terms Carefully Chosen,” *Gainesville Sun*, January 2, 2007.

to the American people.<sup>119</sup> These critics were well-intentioned, well-informed, and sharp-witted, but inasmuch as they displayed little curiosity about the erratic career of the concept weapons of mass destruction, and inasmuch as they repeated this concept often without as much as placing it in quotation marks, they unwittingly participated in the sales campaign they so passionately deplored.

---

<sup>119</sup> Most notably Rich, *Greatest Story Ever Told* (which is based on Rich's weekly *New York Times* columns published largely during the lead-up to the Iraq War).