

Retoryka wizerunku publicznego Rhetoric of the public image

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President Donald J. Trump's Enemy Image Construction in the 2019-2020 Persian Gulf Crisis

Wizerunek wroga w retoryce prezydenta Donalda J. Trumpa w trakcie kryzysu w Zatoce Perskiej (2019-2020)

Abstract

This article concerns enemy image construction in post-Cold War presidential foreign policy crisis rhetoric. It identifies the elements of President Donald J. Trump's enemy imagery in the 2019-2020 Persian Gulf crisis. The analysis is based on Robert L. Ivie's concept of savagery and John R. Butler's and Jason A. Edward's typology of savage imagery. The article makes a claim that Trump represented Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani as a modern savage to justify the US' taking military action to eliminate the enemy. A close reading of the president's language is followed by a discussion of the implications of his choices for the American convention of foreign policy crisis rhetoric.

Artykuł dotyczy wizerunku wroga w retoryce amerykańskich prezydentów w sytuacjach międzynarodowych kryzysów. Analizuje on obraz irańskiego generała Qasema Soleimaniego zawarty w wypowiedziach prezydenta Donalda J. Trumpa w trakcie kryzysu w Zatoce Perskiej w styczniu 2020 roku. Narzędziami analizy są koncepcje Roberta L. Iwiego: topos barbarzyństwa oraz Johna R. Butlera i Jasona A. Edwarda: topos barbarzyńcy prymitywnego i współczesnego. W artykule postawiono tezę, że Trump przedstawił Soleimaniego jako współczesnego barbarzyńcę, aby uzasadnić decyzję o siłowym wyeliminowaniu wroga. Analiza wypowiedzi prezydenta jest wstępem do dyskusji o konsekwencjach wyborów retorycznych dla konwencji retoryki kryzysu.

Key words

enemy image, international crisis, presidential rhetoric, use of force
wizerunek wroga, kryzys międzynarodowy, retoryka prezydencka, użycie siły

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Introduction

On January 2, 2020, the Department of Defense issued a statement that the US military killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani. The statement asserted that Soleimani was responsible for attacks against American service members in Iraq and on the US Embassy in Baghdad. It blamed the Iranian general for the deaths and wounding of American and Iraqi personnel. The rationale behind the strike was to defend US forces and interests around the world and deter future Iranian attacks (U.S. Department of Defense). President Donald J. Trump and administration officials repeatedly claimed that the strike was launched in self-defense to eliminate what they called an “imminent threat” (Esper and Milley 2020; Pompeo and Mnuchin 2020; Trump 2020h). Subsequent presidential and administration statements emphasized that the US was seeking de-escalation and non-military measures to manage further relations with Iran.

Focusing on the rhetoric that surrounds the issue of striking Soleimani, this paper attempts to answer two questions. First, it critically examines how President Trump during the 2019-2020 Persian Gulf crisis used language to construct an image of the enemy. Enemy treatment in the president's Iranian rhetoric, it suggests, is an important element of his justification for the use of force. Second, the paper articulates how Trump used the constructed image of the enemy for his political purposes. Image use, it indicates, allows to legitimate military action.

The analysis concerns the role of enemy construction in US foreign policy discourse (Harle 2000; Spender 2000; Campbell 1998; Khong 1992; Allan and Burridge 1991; Rieber 1991). Specifically, it draws from research on enemy representation in war and foreign policy crisis rhetoric of American presidents for the post-Cold War world. This defines the enemy as that who exists and acts in opposition to a hero represented by the United States – by extension the US president. Its representation is ambiguous; it goes beyond a named individual, group or nation and is oftentimes construed in terms of abstract concepts. The enemy has an identity that contradicts US characteristics and values. Its illegal and

immoral actions, which define its nature as essentially evil, conflict US activities (Lazar and Lazar 2004; Stuckey 1995; Hollihan 1986).

Studies in the field of presidential foreign policy crisis rhetoric analyze enemy construction through the concept of savagery (Viala-Gaudefroy 2020; Ivie and Giner 2015; Edwards 2008; Ben-Porath 2007; West and Carey 2006; Bates 2004; Ivie 2004, 2003, 1982, 1980; Butler 2002; Rogin 1987). In a major work regarding enemy construction through savage imagery, Robert L. Ivie (1980) traces enemy representation to the concepts of force, irrationality, and aggression. It is these three elements that Ivie (1980) considers to be central to presidential portrayals of the enemy as a savage. Two forms of savage imagery are established: the primitive/imperial savage and the modern savage. The image of a primitive/imperial savage is developed through a description of a society or culture that is considered to be uncivilized (Edwards 2008; Butler 2002). The concept is traced, for instance, to the representation of Native Americans in the US policy of Indian removal (Rogin 1987) or the depiction of the Filipinos in the US policy of conquest and annexation of the Philippines (Butler 2002). The modern savage, in turn, is used to describe a leader or a government who possesses a degree of cultural sophistication and structural organization but still acts evil in pursuit of its own interests, power, and resources (Edwards 2008; Butler 2002). Among the most recent representations of a modern savage are those of Saddam Hussein in the narrative of the Persian Gulf War (Bates 2004) and Raoul Cédras in the Haitian crisis (Edwards 2008).

An important element of enemy construction is the issue of force. Scholars of presidential foreign policy crisis rhetoric link enemy representation to the rationale for the use of force, though they differ regarding the nature of the relationship. James Pratt (1970, 199-201), for instance, argues that presidents rationalize their use of force with little specificity about the enemy. They avoid accusatorial strategies and tone and rely on passive structures and use general, anonymous terms. Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., (1983, 64-65) claims that just the opposite is true. According to the author, in justifying military action, presidents suggest little ambiguity regarding the enemy's identity or the nature of the enemy's actions. They direct specific accusations against an identifiable adversary in a hard-hitting manner with the aim of polarizing views, dramatizing events, and warning of terrible negative consequences if military action is not taken. Scholars of presidential war rhetoric make similar connections. Edward J. Lordan (2010, 10-15) and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2008, 224-231) hold that presidents make their cases for war based on the assumption that there is a specific enemy whose evil nature and barbaric actions supply the reasons for the use of force.

The relevant scholarly literature is largely silent regarding the role of language in Trump's management of the critical situation with Iran (Nuruzzaman 2020;

Rapanyane and Shai 2020). Much academic discussion focuses on the president's handling of US relations with Iran in general. Interest has been shown in the question whether Trump continued or shifted on his predecessor's policy course (Nuruzzaman 2020; Entessar and Afrasiabi 2019; Gordon et al. 2019; Guerlain 2018; Mousavian and Mousavian 2018; Simon 2018). An important aspect of research has been the question of perspective. Some scholars have examined Trump's Iranian rhetoric as part of his anti-Muslim narrative (Moradi-Joz et al. 2018; Nuruzzaman 2017); others have investigated it within the context of the 2016 presidential campaign (Çinar et al. 2020). Much attention has been paid to Trump's rhetoric regarding the Iran nuclear deal, with some critics welcoming the president's approach (Blackwill 2019; Khalilzad 2018; Kroenig 2018), while others writing critically about his handling of the problem (Udum 2018), and still others emphasizing the influence of US officials and international actors in constructing the stance (Da Vinha 2019; Yazdani 2019; Burke 2018; Pfiffner 2018; Simon and Stevenson 2018).

The present study draws from and contributes to this research, maintaining that studying presidential crisis rhetoric while paying special attention to examining enemy image construction in justifications for the use of force has the potential to facilitate our understanding of presidential performance in critical situations. Because presidential rhetoric informs about international events, explains the complexities of foreign issues, and rallies public support for a particular course of action, exploration of this nature is likely to be useful for a fuller understanding of US foreign policy in times of international crises. The analysis that follows starts with an examination of factors which shaped and were shaped by Trump's rhetoric. It continues with a textual analysis of the president's formal public utterances, including addresses to Congress, television speeches, news conferences, and remarks, regarding Iran and delivered between January and February 2020 for a reconstruction of enemy image. To avoid issues of artifacts' formality, social media content is excluded from the analysis. The rhetorical framework is provided by the abovementioned concept of savagery. The analysis closes with a discussion of implications of particular enemy image for the president's policy objectives and for the course of US foreign policy.

Background

A series of political events that happened informs the analysis of Trump's rhetorical action. These link to the president's May 2018 decision to officially withdraw the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement reached in July 2015 between Iran and China, France, Russia, the

United Kingdom, the US, Germany and member states of the European Union to restrict and consequently close the Iranian nuclear program. In the follow-up to the decision, in April 2019, the US designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a foreign terrorist organization. In May, Iran announced a breach of the JCPOA terms. May through October, the US and Iran engaged in a series of attacks on each other's oil tankers. In June, Iran shot down a US military surveillance drone and fired a missile onto Saudi Arabia's, a US ally's, oil facilities. In December, it backed a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base, killing an American defense contractor, and supported a storm of US Embassy in Iraq. In retaliation, the US targeted Iran-backed militia groups in Iraq and Syria. In January 2020, it launched a drone strike that killed General Soleimani. Iran responded with a call on the US to leave Iraq and missile strikes against US targets in Iraq. A US reaction was more severe economic sanctions.

Shifting attention from the level of policy to rhetoric, this analysis considers Trump's radicalization of Islam and "otherness" of Muslims (Trump 2019a, b, c, 2017a, b, 2016). It describes the president's language as part of his America First narrative, which conceptually presented the political reality as dichotomous and policy options as mutually exclusive. The narrative identified the villain and cast the US in the role of a hero. It provoked and legitimized militaristic policy response and thus afforded political actors a degree of excusability for their actions. Finally, it promoted the application of superior American moral authority which gave a new impetus to the process of othering (Hall 2021; Thomson 2017). Trump's anti-Iran language tied in with the narrative in terms of the president's objective to broaden the divisions between Iran and the West to the effect of isolating the regime and forcing it to capitulate, discredit what he called a radical Islam as a religion instigating violence and abusing human rights, and target Muslims as a threat to America's economy, moral power, national interests, and global stability. The president's anti-Iranian rhetoric also allowed him to provide a legal and moral framework for a pursuit of massive US military build-up in case confrontation was the way to manage relations with the regime.

An important factor for reading Trump's anti-Iran bias is public opinion regarding Iran. In polls conducted between 2016 and 2020, an average of 82 percent of Americans held a mostly/very unfavorable opinion of the regime. Iran was considered one of the US' four greatest enemies – Russia, China, and North Korea being the other three – ranking third in 2016 and 2020 and fourth in 2018 and 2019. On the question of the Iran nuclear deal, 57 percent of US citizens disapproved of the agreement. On the issue of nuclear weapons, 72 percent to 75 percent saw their development by Iran as a critical threat to US vital interest. Related to the threat was a 53-percent approval for military action against Iran if it did not close

its nuclear program, with 35 percent of respondents supporting forceful measures if diplomatic and economic efforts failed. 63 percent of Americans thought that the US would be too slow to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and 65 were concerned that it would be too quick to use force to do so (Gallup 2020a).

Polls taken between February 2017 and January 2020 put Trump's approval rating of the way he was handling foreign affairs at 39 percent (Gallup 2020b), while surveys conducted between September and October 2019 regarding the way he was handling Iran specifically showed support at the level of 41 percent (University of Maryland, American Attitudes toward the Middle East). Research also suggests approval of Trump's anti-Iran approach among the regime's regional rivals and enemies, including the Israelis, Saudis, and Emiratis. It is argued that similarities between the rhetoric of the US president and Israeli and Saudi officials implied a shared view of the regime as a threat to regional security and national interests. Differences about the role of the US in shaping the Middle East reality existed, with Israel and the Gulf Arab states trying to intensify US involvement in combating the Iranian threat and the US attempting to ensure that facing the danger is its partners' responsibility, but the aim for all was the same, that the regime had to be contained (Nuruzzaman 2020; Simon 2018; Simon and Stevenson 2018).

Finally, the relevant literature indicates a connection between Trump's anti-Iran stance and his advisory system. It links appointments of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster – critics of Iran's terrorist activities – to the administration's policy of putting Iran on notice regarding the US approach towards the regime. It connects replacements of Tillerson and McMaster with Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, respectively – critics of Iran and the Iran nuclear deal – to the president's decision to decertify and ultimately withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement and sharpen US policy towards the regime through sanctions (Da Vinha 2019; Burke 2018; Pfiffner 2018).

Analysis

Analysis of President Trump's statements allows to make three claims. First, it identifies Trump's image of the enemy in the 2019-2020 Persian Gulf crisis as a savage. Ivie (1980, 281) defines a savage as "an aggressor, driven by irrational desires for conquest, who is seeking to subjugate others by force of arms." The argument is that the president projects the image of Soleimani as a savage based on the concepts of force, irrationality, and aggression underlying Ivie's definition.

Ivie (1980, 284-285) understands force as violence and domination. Trump associates Soleimani with brutality and coercion when he calls the Iranian

general a “total monster” (Trump 2020g), a “ruthless terrorist (Trump 2020i),” a “sadistic mass murderer” or “a bloodthirsty terror” (Trump 2020d). In the president’s language, Soleimani “fueled bloody civil wars all across the region” (Trump 2020i), “spread death, destruction, and mayhem across the Middle East and far beyond” and “slaughtered and butchered civilians all over, and military” (Trump 2020d). The general was a savage, according to Trump, because he “was personally responsible for some of the absolutely worst atrocities” (Trump 2020i), was engaged in “bloody rampage” (Trump 2020e) through the world, and had “hands drenched in both American and Iranian blood” (Trump 2020i). The president reinforces the image of savagery through mentions that Soleimani “made the death of innocent people his sick passion” (Trump 2020h) and “loved the roadside bomb” (Trump 2020f). On some occasions, he directly calls the general’s actions “savage” (Trump 2020d) and “evil” (Trump 2020f); on others, he describes their consequences. In a vivid and explicit language, Trump says: “many of the young men and women you see walking around without arms and without legs . . . were done by Soleimani. . . . Great percentages of people don’t have legs right now and arms because of this son of a bitch” (Trump 2020f).

The concept of irrationality, as Ivie (1980, 288) uses it, means acting against law and rational thinking. It is “[circumventing] all the restraints of international law and of humane principles in order to impose [one’s] will on others” (Ivie 1980, 289). Trump captures the image of Soleimani as a lawless enemy when he points out that “[the general] wasn’t supposed to be [in Iraq]. He was a designated terrorist. . . . Because he was designated, and he wasn’t allowed to be there” (Trump 2020f). Statements informing of Soleimani “traveling with the head of Hezbollah . . . to discuss bad business” (Trump 2020j) are made to strengthen the dimension of unlawfulness in enemy construction. The president avoids to explicitly call the general an animal, as he does for instance in the case of the founder and leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Instead, he characterizes Soleimani as one of “the terrorist warlords who plunder their nation to finance bloodshed abroad” (Trump 2020h). Labeling leaders warlords, according to what Paul Jackson (2003, 131) observes, evokes a sense of anarchy, brutality, and terror. Trump constantly repeats that Soleimani “was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel” (Trump 2020h) and “was actively planning new attacks . . . looking very seriously at [US] embassies” (Trump 2020d) to sharpen the desire to subjugate in enemy representation.

To describe the element of aggression, Ivie (1980, 290) refers to the qualities of the enemy’s action as “‘voluntary’ and ‘initial.’” He focuses on the characteristics of free will and preparation that mark a voluntary action and on the absence of an immediate cause for an attack that characterizes the enemy’s initiation of action.

Trump's language as it is employed to construct the image of Soleimani as a savage shows attention to both qualities. Speaking that the general was "threatening American lives" (Trump 2020i) and was "actively planning" (Trump 2020d, e, f) and "plotting" (Trump 2020h) attacks against US targets, the president suggests the enemy took action out of choice and with intent. Trump also talks about the enemy's taking initial action. Statements that "Soleimani directed the recent attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq that badly wounded four servicemembers and killed one American, and he orchestrated the violent assault on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad" (Trump 2020i) followed by comments that "they started it" (Trump 2020g) or "they were there first" (Trump 2020j) construct the image of the general and shapes understanding of his leadership as aggressive. Soleimani's aggression extends to Iran in charges of the regime's persistence "to foment violence, unrest, hatred, and war" (Trump 2020i) and "use of proxy fighters to destabilize its neighbors" (Trump 2020h).

A second claim concerns the form of savage imagery. Trump uses an image of a modern savage to represent Soleimani as America's enemy. Jason A. Edwards (2008, 834) defines a modern savage as "a particular leader or a government perpetrating acts of aggression against the civilized order, which includes deeds against the United States, one of its allies, or the savage agent's own population. . . . the modern savage has some semblance of civilization that is visible through its working governmental structure anchored by institutions. However, this agent is savage because it is bent on subjugating its foes by force of arms." Edwards' (2008, 834-835) interpretation of a modern savage follows Ivie's reading of savagery in characterizing a modern savage along the features of irrationality and evil and stressing the speaker's use of derogatory and accusatorial language in the process of dehumanizing the enemy and its actions. Trump's rhetoric demonstrates the use of both lines of argument. Derogatory terms that demonize the enemy permeate the president's communication. Trump consistently calls Soleimani the "world's top" (Trump 2020c, i) or "number-one" (Trump 2020b, h) terrorist. He labels the general "most ruthless butcher, a monster who murdered or wounded thousands of American servicemembers" (Trump 2020a). Consequently, the president's communication is satiated with accusation of the enemy's aggression such as incitement, violence, terror, and murder. Trump charges Soleimani with attacks against American targets and killing of American servicemembers, with repression, torture and murder of Iranian citizens, and with intimidation and terror of US allies (Trump 2020h, i). He emphasizes the enemy's acts of plunder and rampage and refers to his passion for killing and love of roadside bombs (Trump 2020d, h, e, f).

As a reinforcement of the charges, the president extends the image of Soleimani to a representative of primitive savagery. John R. Butler (2002, 14) defines a primitive savage as “an unsophisticated, confused culture unable to understand the causes of, or solutions to, their own problems.” Advancing understanding of the form, Edwards (2008, 836-837) explains it is created through vague and ambiguous terms and presented through forceful scenes. Trump’s enemy construction features both elements. Vague labelling of armed forces under Soleimani’s leadership as “terrorist” (Trump 2020d) and “ruthless” (Trump 2020h) or of protesters under his direction as “rough warriors . . . looking to do damage . . . going to do very serious harm” (Trump 2020g) indirectly demonizes the general. The same logic applies to the descriptions of the consequences – scenes – of Soleimani’s actions. Language that antagonizes the general evokes images of US military injured in roadside bomb attacks (Trump 2020d, e, f, g, k), links the 2019 Baghdad attack to the 2012 Benghazi attack (Trump 2020d, f, g), and depicts Iran – and by extension the Middle East – as a place of terror and chaos (Trump 2020h, i).

A third and final claim is concerned with the use of savage imagery. As Jeremy Engels (2009, 55) explains, the enemy always serves the political and this can be seen in the case of Iran too. Trump constructs an image of Soleimani as a modern savage to justify the decision to eliminate the Iranian general. The construction functions to distinguish the savage as the force of evil from the US as the force of good (Ivie 2004, 79). It also works to absolve the president from the responsibility for taking military action (Ivie 1980, 281). US presidents rationalize the use of force through emphasis of a distinction between the adversary’s aggressive, irrational, and coercive behavior and the US’ commitment to the ideals of freedom, law, and peace. They rely on an image of America as a civilized nation, guided by reason, tolerant of diversity, and dedicated to peace.

In the case of Trump, the US’ commitment to freedom finds the strongest expression through a declaration that America “[does] not seek regime change” and assurance that the future of Iran “belongs to the people of Iran” (Trump 2020h). Illustrative of US dedication to protect and promote diversity are statements in which the president admits that he has “deep respect for the Iranian people” and admiration for their “incredible heritage and unlimited potential” (Trump 2020h). Such statements are reinforced with expressions of conviction that “Iran can be a great country.” To the people and leaders of Iran, Trump says: “We want you to have a future and a great future – one that you deserve – one of prosperity at home and harmony with the nations of the world” (Trump 2020i). Characteristic of the US, not of Iran, is the willingness to “pursue the interests of good people, great people, great souls, while seeking peace, harmony, and friendship with all of the nations of the world” (Trump 2020h). The US, not Iran, is described as ready

to cooperate. As the president puts it: “We can help [Iran] make a very good and short-time recovery. It can all go very quickly, but perhaps they are too proud or too foolish to ask for that help. We are here. Let’s see which road they choose. It is totally up to them” (Trump 2020a). While the language demonstrates the US’ goodwill, the interpretation is that it also becomes evidence for little likelihood that cooperation between the two parties will develop, because the blame for a lack of collaboration is placed on the enemy.

The image of the US as a civilization that acts by reason in dealing with the enemy is directly projected by Trump through the claim: “Under my leadership, America’s policy is unambiguous: To terrorists who harm or intend to harm any American: We will find you; we will eliminate you” (Trump 2020h). The emphasis is on the quality of action as rational and goal-directed. Referring to the killing of Soleimani, there was an immediate cause for the attack, the president asserts. “We did it because they were looking to blow up our Embassy. We also did it for other reasons that were very obvious” (Trump 2020g). The action was purposeful because “[by] removing Soleimani,” as Trump affirms, “we have sent a powerful message to terrorists: If you value your own life, you will not threaten the lives of our people” (Trump 2020i). A sense of a higher purpose is also a consideration: justice and peace. Arguing that the action “delivered another historic win for American justice” (Trump 2020e), the president is able to prove that the US treats victims with fairness. Through a claim that killing Soleimani made “the world a safer and more peaceful place” (Trump 2020i), he manages to present America as a selfless nation determined to pursue good for all humanity.

That the US is dedicated to the cause of peace and security is also communicated through a language that marks America’s action as defensive and preventive. Trump reassesses the meaning of US attack in terms of a response to the enemy’s aggression when he insists that “In our case, it was retaliation.” He persistently claims that “ours was an attack based on what they did” (Trump 2020j). He underscores the quality of US action as involuntary and provoked when he advises: “If Americans anywhere are threatened, we have all of those targets already fully identified, and I am ready and prepared to take whatever action is necessary. And that, in particular, refers to Iran” (Trump 2020h). Trump’s rhetoric creates understanding of permissiveness of force, for instance, when the president states: “We took action last night to stop a war. We did not take action to start a war” (Trump 2020h). On the other hand, however, it applies the principle of military restraint. “The fact that we have this great military and equipment . . . does not mean we have to use it,” Trump reassures. “We do not want to use it. American strength, both military and economic, is the best deterrent” (Trump 2020i), he assures.

Discussion and conclusions

From the analysis of how Trump establishes an image of Soleimani as a modern savage and how he uses the image to justify the use of force against the enemy we can learn three things. First, Trump's rhetorical action regarding Iran exemplifies continued use and popularity of savage imagery. Two updates on American public opinion views regarding Iran – favorability rating and the perceived threat that the regime posed – can be evidence that savage imagery still resonates with the US audience. First, Iran's unfavorable rating among American respondents rose from 82 percent in 2019 to 88 percent in 2020. Second, Iran moved ahead of North Korea on the US' greatest enemy list from the fourth place in 2019 to the third one in 2020, with China and Russia ranking first and second, respectively (Gallup 2020a). Similar trends were observed outside of the US. A drop in share of people around the world who expressed anti-Iran sentiment in 2019 was followed by a noticeable rise in critical assessment of the regime among international publics in 2020. In all countries surveyed majorities viewed Iran negatively (Pew Research Center 2020a, b). Savage imagery appealed to publics in line with Ivie's (1980, 295) argument that "As a mode of symbolic action, it depends upon the tactic of direct and indirect suggestion, on the omission of balanced and potentially conflicting information about the adversary's character, conduct, and or condition, and, ultimately, on the credibility of the administration in power." Polls which showed a rise in the American public's confidence in Trump from a level of 40 percent in 2019 to a level of 45 percent in 2020 (Pew Research Center 2020c) can be interpreted as a reflection of the translation of public opinion's responsiveness on the trust issue into popular reaction to the enemy imagery. While research has not yet determined the power of presidential governance through popular leadership (see Aune and Medhurst 2008; Edwards III 2006, 1996; Zarefsky 2004, for more details) and findings about the connection between policy and opinion have been mixed, (see Goldberg 2016; Miles 2016; Mueller and Stewart 2016a, b; Asher 2015; Canes-Wrone 2015; Druckman and Jacobs 2015, 2011; Canes-Wrone and Kelly 2013; Shapiro 2011; Knecht 2010; Rottinghaus 2010; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Zaller 2003; Jacobs and Shapiro 2002; Canes-Wrone et al. 2001; Cohen 1999 for more details) this analysis provides evidence in favor of the assumption that presidential rhetoric links to the public's policy perceptions and assessments.

A second takeaway from the analysis is that Trump's use of savage imagery reflects rhetorical continuity of forms used by post-Cold War presidents. Acknowledging different contextual dynamics, Trump made rhetorical choices regarding Iran comparable to those made by Bill Clinton regarding his rhetoric on Haiti and George W. Bush regarding his rhetoric on Iraq. Those presidents' practice was to

construct an image of a modern savage, depicting a leader who relied on aggression and lawlessness to seek power and pursue his own interests, and intertwine it with an image of a primitive savage, representing an evil force that threatened the (American) civilized order. To illustrate, Clinton identified Raoul Cédras, the Haitian military junta leader, as primary America's enemy (Edwards 2008) and named chaos as the enemy to an order based on market democracy (Olson 2004). The president managed the crisis in Haiti calling out "Cédras and his armed thugs," "Cédras and his accomplices," "dictators," and "tyrants." He built his case against Cédras and his associates on the charges of human rights abuses and usurpation of power (Clinton 1994). Chaos as enemy expanded the perspective to include Cédras' atrocities and crimes as threats to American capitalism and democracy (Olson 2004). Similarly, Bush portrayed Saddam Hussein as an ultimate modern savage (Lazar and Lazar 2007) and cultivated an image of a primitive savage through the label of threat (Dunmire 2007). The president substituted "tyrant" (Bush 2002b), "dictator" (Bush 2002c), "terrorist" (Bush 2001), or "oppressor" (Bush 2003a), for the Iraqi leader and termed his rule "tyranny" (Bush 2003b), "dictatorship" (Bush 2003c), "terror," and "regime" (Bush 2002a). His charges against Hussein also ran along the lines of threat for representing the enemy as endangering the US security and the US world order (Dunmire 2007). In Trump's rhetoric on Iran one can see a continuation of the practice. The president treats two types of savage imagery as complementary to each other rather than mutually exclusive. He reinforces a central image of Soleimani as a modern savage with the scene which exposes the Iranian general for his evil actions and thus depicts the enemy also as a primitive savage.

A third and final takeaway is that savage imagery continues to be cultivated in presidential justifications for the use of force. As a line of argument, it persists to expose America for its commitment to the ideals of freedom, law, and peace and excuse the US president for taking military action to defend them. As Jason C. Flanagan (2004) argues, the themes that constitute the image of America and its role in the world and the idea of the use of force are central to enemy-construction. Importantly for this study, Ivie (1980, 290) calls images of savages "a limited strategy . . . with no guarantee of a permanent grant of public adherence" and the case of Iran illustrates the point. Trump's application of rhetoric demonstrates that the use of physical force constantly demands the evocation of moral principles that guide military action. According to polls, Americans remained starkly divided over the use of the military in foreign conflicts. When asked about the US airstrike that resulted in the death of Soleimani, about half of respondents (53 percent Gallup (2020a) Poll and 48 percent Pew Research Center (2020c) Poll) approved of the action. Compared with similar narrow-range actions,

the level of support was typical. Use of force in Syria in 2018 and 2017, in Libya in 2011, or in Kosovo in 1999 also garnered approval from about half of Americans (Gallup 2018). Also, Trump's rhetoric is evidence of a sustained effort taken by US presidents to characterize their military decisions as excusable in that they are forced by the enemy's actions. The point that Trump's rhetoric was consequential can be delivered, for instance, through survey results which revealed that 54 percent of Americans thought that the president's handling of the Iran issue made US confrontation with the regime more likely and 44 percent believed that his policies caused America less safe (Pew Research Center 2020c). Hence, using enemy-construction that drew from the trope of savagery is viewed as relating to a strategy that functioned rhetorically to position Soleimani in terms of a force that was causative. This construction diminished the president's role in the situation to the effect of decreasing his responsibility for the measures taken to resolve it and the perception of him as prompted to take forceful action irrationally and by choice.

To conclude, research tends to represent Trump's rhetoric as a departure from the practice of his predecessors. Studies expose Trump for a communication style that was unlike any of previous modern presidents in that it violated applicable norms and standards (Rowland 2021, Mercieca 2020, O'Brien 2020). Few examinations suggest any elements of continuity in Trump's rhetorical action (Rubin 2020). This analysis, based on the president's formal public utterances which focus on the justification for the use of force, provides an opportunity to demonstrate that Trump followed foreign policy crisis rhetoric convention. It finds that despite a distinctive communication style the president chose tools to construct an image of the enemy and rationalize the US' taking military action that were similar to those of his modern predecessors.

Implications of the findings are two. First, Trump's rhetorical action can be reflective of continued reluctance among US presidents to resist a major change of the image of aggressor (Ivie 1980, 293-294). The enemy is still a powerful argument for the use of force (Edwards 2008, 835). Second, Trump's approach can demonstrate ongoing commitment of US presidents to the principle that American power to respond to critical situations is defined primarily by American military power. Claims that physical force is necessary, legal, and moral, and thus is justified consistently drive presidential military decisions.

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