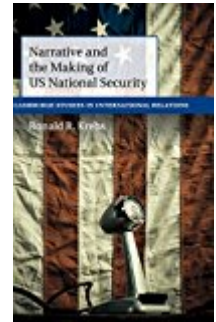


**Ronald R. Krebs.** *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Illustrations, tables. 416 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-50399-1.



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Does the dog wag the tail or does the tail wag the dog? Narratives make sense of the world around us. Consider the case of the United States. To what extent do political elites, particularly presidents, craft narratives to mold the behavior of domestic audiences and thus affect policy and to what extent do narratives constrain political elites? Ronald R. Krebs's new book, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, examines these questions in an engaging and thoughtful manner. Krebs focuses on two questions: "First, how and when have particular narratives of national security become dominant, and how and when have these dominant narratives come undone? Second, what impact has the emergence of narratives as dominant, and their subsequent fall from that powerful perch, had on national security policy" (p. 3)? Krebs, who focuses the book primarily on the first question, examines three factors relevant to the rise and fall of narratives: "the rhetorical demands of the environment; the material, normative, and institutional power speakers bring to bear; and the rhetorical modes they

adopt" (p. 5). To study these factors, Krebs presents a "synthetic theoretical framework" and then examines four case studies (two of failure and two of success) of presidents and their narrative projects to examine whether they were able to cast their narrative as the dominant one. Following this, via content analysis of editorials from two prominent newspapers from the Cold War, Krebs focuses on the narrative of the Cold War consensus and shows how it was weakened or strengthened.

Overall, the book is very engaging. Krebs lays out and follows a clear path for the reader. The book is appropriate for and will interest both students and scholars who study narrative specifically, and those in national security studies, international relations, and communications. Krebs anticipates readers' questions in the text. He provides alternate explanations throughout the book, which is very commendable, and in the final chapter he discusses some ideas for possible further research. These include conducting analysis

on other countries and other policy domains, and on the role of narrative in the new media age.

An initial agenda-setting chapter defines key concepts, presents important questions, and lays out the proposed research plan. Overall Krebs successfully grapples with much of the arc of a narrative's lifespan. Less attention is paid to the origins of narratives, which does not undermine the conclusions of the book but does make following the story a bit challenging for those new to studying the importance of narratives, since the story is joined in progress, in a sense. For example, Krebs notes that both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan were frustrated that their fellow Americans could not see the right strategy, but where did their interventionist leanings come from and to what extent were they shared among political elites or the public? That is, how and why are narratives, dominant or otherwise, created? Additional discussion of a narrative cycle could have added to the contextual framework in which the book is set.

A second challenge for the author is definitional. First, what does it mean for a narrative to dominate? Is a dominant narrative defined by who and how many believe in it? Is it dominant because it shapes policy more than other narratives do? Related to this point is advice to the reader as to whether one ought to see the influence of one narrative or many. There seem to be "deeper identity narratives" (p. 13), such as the notion of American exceptionalism, in which national security narratives might be embedded. Krebs notes that "American exceptionalism has been sufficiently flexible to have sustained policies that are diametrically opposed" (p. 14). Should the reader view one layer with one or multiple competing narratives or are narratives layered within higher or lower narratives, much like a nesting doll? Second, what is meant by national security? Is the focus on national security strategy, grand strategy, or national security policy? Additional discussion of this term and the fac-

tors that influence US national security policy, such as doctrine (perhaps this is a dominant narrative?) and capabilities, relationship with allies, and the perception of threats from adversaries, based on presumably other narratives of their intent and capabilities, would also have added crucial context.

The book is organized into two parts. Part 1 focuses on presidents and their efforts to craft a dominant narrative. The second chapter lays out the theoretical framework. Krebs's first chapter presents a "sparer model" that focuses on two variables: the narrative situation (settled or unsettled) and the rhetorical mode used by speakers (argument or storytelling). Combining these two factors yields four scenarios, two of which are considered "mismatched." When the narrative situation is settled, then a dominant narrative exists. In such a situation, speakers can use argument to undermine others' potential counterarguments. Speakers could turn to storytelling and either challenge (but fail in the present) the dominant narrative or more commonly "fold a specific case into the dominant narrative" (p. 47). The description of the model raises two issues that Krebs grapples with: identifying the variables and mechanisms for moving between possible outcomes.

Based on the introduction, I expected a dominant narrative to be the dependent variable, which was expressed as a dichotomy (either present or not), and two independent variables—rhetorical mode (argument and storytelling) and authority of the speaker. I thus found figure 2.1 a bit confusing, expecting two independent variables for the rows and columns and the dependent variable as the outcome described in each cell. The model presented in figure 2.1 has the dependent variable on the top and one independent variable (rhetorical mode) on the side. Krebs does bring in authority later in the book, but it is worthwhile to look at the model in the figure because it raises two interesting questions detailed

in the next paragraph. Briefly and clockwise from the top left, the four outcomes are: top left (dominant narrative, argument) top right (no dominant narrative, argument), lower right (no dominant narrative, storytelling), and lower left (dominant narrative, storytelling).

In the top left scenario (dominant narrative and argument), the interesting questions seem to be not when does a dominant narrative arise but rather when does contestation (dueling narratives) occur and when does rhetorical coercion (employing rhetorical strategies to deny others material to create alternate narratives) occur and who uses it. Second, what are the mechanisms by which one moves from this cell to another? The speaker could change to storytelling (either via a new speaker or a speaker with a new strategy) and move to the lower left cell, but the dominant narrative would remain. How does one move to a situation where there is no dominant narrative? This is addressed more in part 2 of the book, but the impatient reader might wish for some explanation at this point in the text. Speakers and audiences trapped in the top right cell (no dominant narrative and argument) apparently cannot move directly to a dominant narrative but can move indirectly, if the speaker first switches modes. Once the speaker shifts to storytelling, then a dominant narrative can emerge. This seems like a necessary condition then, but is it sufficient? And if it is not sufficient, what else might be playing a role? Krebs then argues that this model has a missing piece, which is the authority of the speaker, and then proceeds to add this variable to the model, although this dimension is not as well defined in practice. It is unlikely that one would treat this variable as dichotomous, since a speaker's authority is unlikely to be at the endpoints of the spectrum, however defined, but probably somewhere in the middle and often changing over time.

Krebs then offers a fourth element, though discounts it—the role of content, or what is said. Krebs suggests that content of narratives will not

tell you which competing narrative will win, but the content of storytelling is “crucial” to understanding how a dominant narrative constrains future debate. One might expect the content of a narrative to be unique across situations. To summarize: four causes are presented, but it is a bit unclear, at least to me, as to which ones were sufficient to lead to which outcomes or the movement between outcomes. Interestingly, Krebs does not spend much time on the role of the audience at this point or on an analysis of whether the narrative is aimed at a single audience or many (e.g., the American public, other world leaders). Might the same narrative be interpreted differently by different audiences and could presidential speeches sound similar but be aimed at reassuring US allies at times and the American public at others, for example?

Chapters 3 and 4 cover the four cases. Presidents failed in the two cases presented in chapter 3: FDR's attempt to get the United States more involved in World War II, against a broad noninterventionist trend, and Reagan's efforts to support the Contras in Nicaragua as part of a get tough against Communism stance. It is debatable whether these two events were equally important to national security, though Krebs writes that Nicaragua was the “centerpiece of Reagan's campaign to revive America's belief in its own virtue and to set America back on the path toward greatness” (p. 120). Presidents fortunately can succeed, as two case studies in chapter 4 illustrate: FDR's efforts to frame the adversaries in World War II improved after Pearl Harbor and George W. Bush's efforts to give meaning to the events of 9/11 likewise created a dominant “Terror” narrative. Overall, Krebs argues well on behalf of his position of the preferred narrative of FDR, Reagan, and Bush. It is an interesting omission that we do not judge FDR's, Reagan's, and Bush's narratives as good or bad or the resulting national security strategy or policy that resulted from acceptance of those narratives. Moreover, there is little on the impact of moving from an unsettled period

to a period with a dominant narrative on national security policy. Most discussion revolves around the impact of the Terror narrative on the Iraq war, though not on the US fight against jihadists or the war in Afghanistan. Krebs argues that the dominant narrative did not make the Iraq war inevitable. A dominant narrative may be necessary but was not sufficient. Rather, the use of rhetorical coercion within that narrative helped push America to war.

An interesting methodological aside considers these cases. Although it is somewhat outside the scope of the book, one wonders how many narrative cases existed from the 1930s to the 2000s, from which the four cases examined were drawn. Krebs argues that his cases are tough for his theory, which seems like a valid reason to select them, but it would be interesting to see how he defines the overall population of cases. This might indirectly also help clarify what is meant by national security. At the conclusion of part 1, Krebs argues that a dominant narrative cannot last forever, although some last longer than others. In the model presented in figure 2.1, this is akin to moving from the left side of the model to the right. In part 2, Krebs focuses on how dominant narratives continue or fall by the wayside. Here, Krebs fleshes out the question of how one might move from a dominant narrative to an unsettled situation: when “elites publicly challenge key tenets” of the dominant narrative (p. 176). Then the question becomes when do they do this and why. Krebs’s key point in part 2 is that battlefield outcomes, that is, military victories, are one force that allows this change.

Krebs first defines the notion of the Cold War consensus, which characterized the world as bipolar, zero-sum, and adversarial with the United States on one side and a monolithic Communist empire centered on the USSR on the other. US leadership was needed and Communism had to be contained. Krebs notes however that the consensus “did not sustain only a single approach”

(p. 193). This is a challenge for the analysis in this book as it supports the notion that narratives are sufficiently flexible to allow different policies, which means that it is hard to link a specific narrative to a specific national security strategy or policy and thus to evaluate the consequences of narratives on national security.

Krebs posits that the conventional wisdom places the beginning of the Cold War consensus around late 1947 or 1948; it remained as the dominant narrative until the agony of the Vietnam War, when the narrative fell apart. Krebs is suspicious of this view and so uses longitudinal analysis to examine the arc of the narrative from 1945 to 1991. He does this in chapters 6 and 7, which focus on content analysis of editorials in two important newspapers: the liberal *New York Times* and the conservative *Chicago Tribune*. Based on this analysis, Krebs revises the timeline for the consensus, suggesting it came together later—in the first half of the 1950s—and fell apart sooner—in the early 1960s. Then a new consensus emerged in the 1970s. The explanation for this is at least in part due to military successes and failures; however, it is success that allows elites to reconsider the narrative direction, while military failures tend to lead to contestation within the confines of the dominant narrative, rather than to significant criticism and then collapse of that narrative. Thus Korea and Vietnam supported the endurance of the Cold War consensus, while the Cuban Missile Crisis allowed for the narrative’s redirection. The central question then is to what extent is this the only factor that explains change in narrative and if it is not the sole explanation, what else might explain it. Krebs argues that it is not “exogenous shocks, alleged global realities, and change in administration” (p. 283). He presents evidence to this effect, but some readers may remain skeptical.

Overall, the book is very interesting to read, from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. It raises a number of provocative ideas, particu-

larly in part 2. As more and more scholarship is completed, it will be interesting to see how the ideas presented here align with findings from studies on other countries, a different set of elites, or other types of policy. Likewise, one could empirically test other sources of information, such as other types of public opinion or possibly other government opinions, for example, US National Intelligence Estimates on the Soviet Union, where the audience is top-level political leaders. In the meantime, this is a worthy addition to the literature on the study of narrative and international relations.

The views expressed in this book review are mine and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Intelligence University, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

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