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'Weapons of Mass Destruction': Historicizing the Concept†

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The danger posed by 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD) was the Bush administration's chief justification for invading Iraq in 2003. Amid the ceaseless repetition of this phrase during the run-up to the invasion, 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 created the threat. After the Iraq fiasco, 'WMD' became the object of satire and its rhetorical power diminished. Still, other, equally-ambiguous phrases such as 'failed states' remain available to be embellished rhetorically for the purpose of producing foreign threats.

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 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.[1]

In the invasion's aftermath, however, a massive search for these weapons failed to find them.[2] The failure generated a heated debate between defenders (or mild critics) of the Bush administration, who characterized the fiasco as an unintentional 'intelligence

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1 "President rallies troops at Fort Hood," 3 Jan. 2003, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030103.html .

2 Woodward, *Plan of attack*, p. 418; Packer, *Assassins' gate*, p. 298.

failure',[3] and harsh critics, who charged that the administration deliberately 'misrepresented the intelligence' about Iraq's WMD and presented a 'fraudulent' case for war.[4]

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[5] stopped to ask: what does 'WMD' mean anyway? 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 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. 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 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 US 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 without raising questions about its meaning, even the sharpest critics of the Iraq war contributed unwittingly to the firming-up of this term, thus reinforcing the rhetorical construction of the Iraqi threat.

In this essay, then, rather than search for the essence of 'weapons of mass destruction', we historicize the concept and dispel the illusion that it has a stable, unambiguous meaning.[6] Our exploration is guided by Friedrich Nietzsche's view 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.[7]

Following Nietzsche's formulation, we analyze the metonym weapons of mass

[3] The notion of '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.

[4] Ibid, pp. 398, 19.

[5] For example, Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*; Rich, *Greatest story*.

[6] One scholar who *has* challenged the essentialist understanding of WMD is Michelle Bentley, whose work nicely dovetails with our analysis. See her 'Long goodbye' and *Weapons*.

[7] Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche,* pp. 46-7; emphasis added.

destruction as a 'sum' of past political and social 'human relations'.[8] 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 UN disarmament negotiations in 1946–48, 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, how the concept experienced a 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 2002–03: how its condensation of diverse meanings into a single phrase, its reinforcement by other ominous expressions such as 'mushroom cloud', its 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.

I The Emergence, "Enhancement," and "Transposition" of WMD, 1937–1945

'Weapons of mass destruction' was apparently coined by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In his 1937 Christmas day radio broadcast, he stated

> Who can think without dismay of the fears, jealousies, and suspicions which have compelled nations, our own among them, 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? [9]

The Archbishop's 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—12 of the 21 *New York Times* articles that contained this term during the decade did not place it in the context of modern warfare. [10] During World War II the frequency of 'mass destruction' in the 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 *New York Times* reported on an air raid resulting in the

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[8] Chandler, *Semiotics*, p. 233, defines a metonym as 'a figure of speech that involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way, notably the substitution of effect [purported mass destruction] for cause [e.g., nuclear explosion; chemical reaction]'.

[9] 'Archbishop's appeal' in *London Times*, 28 Dec. 1937.

[10] We use 'article' as a generic category aggregating news reports, editorials, opinion pieces, readers' letters and advertisements.

'mass destruction' of an Austrian factory.[11] Immediately after the US 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, 34 clergymen publicly appealed to President Truman to halt production of the atomic bomb, which they characterized as 'the technology of mass destruction'.[12]

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 arms race. Their position was supported by senior 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.[13]

On 16 November 1945 the press reported on a meeting of President Truman with Prime Ministers Clement Attlee of Britain and W. L. Mackenzie King of Canada. The *New York Times* printed the text of the declaration issued by the conferees while the paper's columnist Arthur Krock paraphrased the declaration's 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.[14]

Image 1: New York Times journalist Arthur Krock
Source: United States Library of Congress.

11 'Plant in Austria bombed to ruins' in *NY Times*, 4 Nov. 1943.
12 'Truman is urged to bar atom bomb' in *NY Times*, 20 Aug. 1945.
13 Gaddis, *United States*, pp. 247–53; Bernstein, 'Quest'.
14 'In the Nation: "In Other Words"—Truman, Attlee, King' in New York Times, 16 Nov. 1945; emphasis added.

This was the first time the *New York Times* (and probably 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 longer phrase 'atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction'.[15]

How did 'all other major weapons' crop up in the declaration even though the 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 and he subsequently co-drafted the declaration signed by President Truman and the two prime ministers.[16] According to his autobiography, Bush suggested inserting the words 'and all 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'.[17]

The 'equally terrible' weapon type that Bush had in mind was biological.[18] Bush helped oversee secret research into germ warfare during World War II, and in 1944 he tried unsuccessfully to promote within the government the idea of placing biological weapons under international control.[19] 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 US policy position, let alone slip into the tripartite declaration the words 'all other major 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 [B-29] super-bomber'—commentators paid little attention to the debut of 'other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction'.[20] Still, by inserting these words into a major official document Bush made it probable that the phrase would later be recycled in diplomatic negotiations. In Nietzsche's terms, Bush 'enhanced' this figure of speech by introducing it into diplomatic discourse and 'transposed' it from a term that might have become associated exclusively with atomic 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.

II Continued "Transposition" and "Enhancement," 1946–1948

In December 1945, at a conference of the 'big three' (the US, Britain, and Soviet) foreign ministers held in Moscow, the Soviets accepted the plan—outlined in the Truman-Attlee-King declaration—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 declaration issued at the conclusion of the meeting.[21]

15 Gaddis, *United States,* p. 271.
16 Ibid., p. 270; Bush, *Pieces*, p. 296.
17 Bush, Pieces, p. 297.
18 Ibid, p. 297; Tannenwald, *Nuclear taboo*, p. 103.
19 Guillemin, *Biological weapons*, pp. 53, 58, 74.
20 'Washington calling: freedom of science' in *Washington Post*, 17 Nov. 1945.
21 'Text of communiqué issued by big three after the Moscow conference' in *NY Times*, 27 Dec. 1945; Bernstein, 'Quest', pp. 1028–9; Gaddis, *United States,* p. 279.

On 24 January 1946 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to establish a commission to plan for international control of atomic energy.[22] 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 'mass destruction' referred strictly to atomic weapons.[23]

Bernard Baruch, who was named by President Truman as ambassador to the UN Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC), was reluctant to be a 'messenger boy' for the Acheson-Lilienthal blueprint, and proceeded to formulate his own plan.[24] 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'.[25] In presenting his plan to the UNAEC in June 1946, Baruch declared that

> before a country is ready to relinquish any winning weapons it must have more than words to reassure it. 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.[26]

The Soviet ambassador, Andrei Gromyko, countered with an alternative plan that also contained references to 'atomic weapons and all other similar weapons of mass destruction'.[27] But whereas Baruch associated such 'other' weapons with 'bacteriological, biological, gas' warfare, Gromyko left this category undefined.

In subsequent months negotiation sessions in the UN over atomic energy became increasingly acrimonious.[28] In one of these sessions, held at the UN Political and Security Committee on 2 December 1946, the issue of 'other weapons of mass destruction' came to the fore after it had been 'ignored' in previous months.[29] The US delegate, Senator Tom Connally, '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[30]'. Connally remarked that 'the victims of poison gas or biological germs were just as dead as those killed by the bomb'[31]. The British delegate, Sir Hartley Shawcross, supported Connally's view that the scope of international control must be

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22 UN Doc. A/RES/1(I), Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy.

23 Gaddis, *United States,* p. 332; Bernstein, 'Quest', pp. 1029–32. The full report is posted at http://www.learnworld.com/ZNW/LWText.Acheson-Lilienthal.html.

24 Bernstein, 'Quest' pp. 1032–5.

25 Ibid., p. 1036. See also Bentley, *Weapons*, pp. 36–7.

26 'Baruch's speech at opening session of U.N. Atomic Energy Commission' in *NY Times*, 15 June 1946.

27 'The texts of the principal speeches on the proposals to control atomic energy' in *NY Times*, 20 June 1946.

28 Herken, *Winning weapon*, p. 189.

29 Hamilton, T., 'Molotov says veto could not be used in arms inspection' in *NY Times*, 5 Dec. 1946.

30 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in *NY Times*, 3 Dec. 1946.

31 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in *NY Times*, 3 Dec. 1946.

extended to non-atomic weapons[32]. Noting that 20 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 prohibition of the most terrible . . . There is no longer safe ground for being sure that the atom bomb is the most terrible'.[33]

The Soviet delegate, Andrei Vishinsky, responded that Connally's position was but a ploy to prolong America's atomic monopoly. 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'[34]. 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 24 January 1946, which established the UNAEC (in fact, the resolution referred to 'other weapons adaptable to mass destruction' without naming specific weapons)[35]. Vishinsky added that his government favored 'a general reduction of armaments . . . applying to all kinds, types and categories of weapons'.[36]

The discussion of other 'weapons of mass destruction' continued in subsequent days. On 4 December 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"'.[37] *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'.[38] 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.'.[39] Connally stated that when the US forgoes its atomic weapon, 'we want other nations to forego the use of other weapons of mass destruction—rockets, jet planes, etc.'.[40] 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.[41]

Molotov's concession fell short of bridging the gulf separating the US and Soviet positions.[42] On 30 December 1946, the UNAEC adopted the Baruch plan by a 10-0 vote, with the Soviet Union and Poland abstaining.[43] Although Baruch regarded the vote as a personal victory, for his Plan it portended defeat since the dispute was merely transferred to the Security Council, where the Soviets could veto the Baruch Plan.[44] After Baruch's

32 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in *NY Times*, 3 Dec. 1946.
33 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in *NY Times*, 3 Dec. 1946.
34 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in NY Times, 3 Dec. 1946.
35 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in NY Times, 3 Dec. 1946.
36 Adams, F., 'U.S. wants all weapons brought under arms control' in NY Times, 3 Dec. 1946.
37 Hamilton, T., 'Molotov says veto could not be used in arms inspection' in NY Times, 5 Dec. 1946
38 Hamilton, 'Molotov says veto'.
39 Hamilton T., 'Molotov accepts curbs on all arms' in *NY Times*, 7 Dec. 1946.
40 Hamilton T., 'Molotov accepts curbs on all arms' in *NY Times*, 7 Dec. 1946.
41 Hamilton T., 'Molotov accepts curbs on all arms' in *NY Times,* 7 Dec. 1946.
42 Ibid.
43 Gaddis, *United States,* p. 334
44 Gaddis, *United States,* p. 334; Bernstein, 'Quest for security', pp. 1043–4.

'victory', UN disarmament talks continued for another two years.[45] Although these talks were largely fruitless, they are of considerable interest from our perspective because the delegates continued to wrestle, from time to time, with the meaning of 'weapons of mass destruction'.

In early 1947 the Soviet Union proposed that, in accordance with a December 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'.[46] The United States, however, objected to folding the talks over 'weapons of mass destruction' into a general disarmament framework. American diplomats insisted that the UNAEC '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.[47]

As the *New York Times* pointed out on 1 February 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 UNAEC from that of the disarmament commission.[48] The following day, the *New York 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.[49]

On 12 February 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'.[50] The *New York 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 age'.[51] The Council, however, defined neither 'minor' weapons nor 'weapons of mass destruction'.

In summer 1947 the US submitted to the new United Nations Commission for Conventional Armaments 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'.[52] The US delegate, Franklin Lindsey, explained that this definition applied to the atomic bomb, radioactive materials, and deadly chemical and

45 Herken, *Winning weapon*, p. 190.
46 Hamilton, T., 'U.S. revising stand for atom primacy' in *NY Times*, 1 Feb. 1947.
47 Hamilton, T., 'U.S. Facing rebuff on atom priority' in *NY Times*, 2 Feb. 1947.
48 Hamilton, 'U.S. revising stand'.
49 Hamilton, "U.S. facing rebuff."
50 'Disarmament meets a test' in *NY Times*, 13 Feb. 1947; see Tannenwald, *Nuclear taboo,* p. 104.
51 'Disarmament meets a test' in *NY Times*, 13 Feb. 1947; see Tannenwald, *Nuclear taboo,* p. 104.
52 Rosenthal, A. M., 'U.S. asks one body curb worst arms' in *NY Times*, 21 Aug. 1947.

biological mixtures.[53] He excluded airplanes and warships from the WMD category because they were merely 'carriers' of destructive weapons, not 'producers' of destruction.[54] 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 UNAEC's jurisdiction.[55]

A few weeks later, the US pressed for a resolution to be adopted by the Commission, which states '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',[56] 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".[57]' The Soviets opposed 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'.[58]

The Soviets got their wish of linking atomic and conventional disarmament in early 1952, when the moribund UNAEC was fused with the Commission for Conventional Armaments into the 'UN Disarmament Commission'.[59] Still, it is notable that, before its dissolution, the Commission for Conventional Armaments 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, radio-active 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'.[60] 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-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, *NY Times*), 'long-range rockets, bacteriological warfare, etc.' (Shawcross), 'rockets, jet planes, etc.' (Connally), 'bacteriological warfare and guided missiles' (*NY Times*), and 'the B-29 plane . . . carriers and battleships" (*NY Times*). Finally, the Commission on Conventional Armament resolved that the WMD category included atomic, radioactive, biological, and chemical weapons, as well as future weapons capable of comparable destruction. This resolution constituted a

53 Rosenthal, A. M., 'U.S. asks one body curb worst arms' in *NY Times*, 21 Aug. 1947.
54 Rosenthal, A. M., 'U.S. asks one body curb worst arms' in *NY Times*, 21 Aug. 1947.
55 Rosenthal, A. M., 'U.S. asks one body curb worst arms' in *NY Times*, 21 Aug. 1947.
56 Jones, G. E., 'Soviet balks vote on U.S. arms plan', in *NY Times*, 6 Sept. 1947.
57 Jones, G. E., 'Soviet balks vote on U.S. arms plan', in *NY Times*, 6 Sept. 1947.
58 Jones, G. E., 'Soviet balks vote on U.S. arms plan', in *NY Times*, 6 Sept. 1947.
59 Un Doc. A/RES/502(VI), Regulation, Limitation and Balanced Reduction of All Armed Forces and All Armaments; International Control of Atomic Energy.
60 UN Doc. S/C.3/32/Rev.1, Commission for Conventional Armaments, Resolutions Adopted by the Commission at Its Thirteenth Meeting, 12 August 1948, and a Second Progress Report on the Commission, p. 2; Price, *Chemical weapons taboo*, p. 144; Carus, *Defining,* p. 20; Tannenwald, *Nuclear taboo*, p. 104.

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.

III 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, including the 1967 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America; the 1967 Outer Space Treaty; the 1971 Seabed Treaty; the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention; and the 1979 SALT II Treaty.[61] Moreover, as Michelle Bentley demonstrates, the term was employed frequently by US defense and arms control officials during the 1950s and 1960s.[62] But even as 'WMD' remained in circulation within the bureaucracy, government officials sometimes deliberately sought to blur the 'picture' emblazoned on this coin of speech 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.[63] At other times, when US officials were publicly pressed to define 'WMD', they fell short of reproducing the definition adopted by the UN. During the 1967 Senate hearing on the Outer Space Treaty, when chief US negotiator Arthur Goldberg was asked to specify 'the other weapons of mass destruction', he replied: 'Bacteriological, any type of weapons which could lead to the same type of catastrophe that a nuclear weapon could lead to'.[64] Goldberg thus omitted three elements of the UN's 1948 definition: radioactive material weapons, lethal chemical weapons, and future weapons capable of causing comparable destruction.

If US foreign policy specialists were sometimes reluctant or unable to portray 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.[65]

Not only had the use of 'WMD' by the press become increasingly infrequent, but on those occasions in which it *had* appeared, 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 articles either mentioned no specific weapon systems or placed 'WMD' in the context of nuclear weapons alone. 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.

As Michelle Foucault explained in his commentary on Nietzsche, the genealogical

61 The full texts of these treaties (in the order in which they are mentioned above) are available at http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/opanal/text/index.html; https://www.state.gov/t/isn/5181.htm; https://www.state.gov/t/isn/5187.htm; https://www.state.gov/t/isn/4718.htm; and https://www.state.gov/t/isn/5195.htm.

62 Bentley, *Weapons*, chap. 3.

63 Carus, *Defining,* pp. 22–3.

64 Ibid., p. 24.

65 The data were generated from the archives of the *NY Times* online at http://www.nytimes.com. In the 1970s and 1980s 'WMD' was rarely used not only in the press but also within the foreign policy bureaucracy—see Bentley, *Weapons*, p. 72.

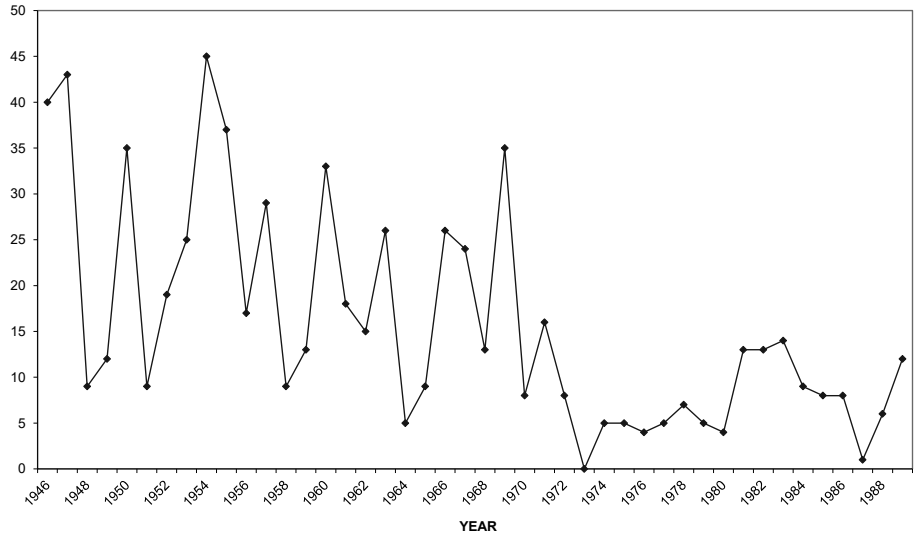

Figure 1: *Frequency of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' in the New York Times 1946-1989*

Source: http://nytimes.com

investigation of concepts requires not only the excavation of 'the different scenes where they engaged in different roles'; genealogy 'must define even those instances when [these concepts] are absent'.[66] 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 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.[67] Although the US government insisted that tear gases and defoliants were not true chemical weapons, critics of the war charged that the usage of such chemical agents violated international law.[68] Judging from the coverage of the controversy by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*, the phrase WMD was entirely absent not only from the official discourse of the US government but also from the pronouncements of its critics. Even Soviet diplomats—who frequently accused the US of 'using poison gas' or 'violat[ing] international law by using chemicals'—were never reported to have charged that the US employed 'weapons of mass destruction' in Vietnam.[69]

Similarly, the concept WMD was absent from reporting on the use of poison gas by the Egyptian air force in the Yemen, which resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths.[70] Between

66 Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', p. 76.
67 Tucker, *War of nerves*, p. 223.
68 Graham, *Disarmament sketches*, pp. 22–5.
69 First quotation: 'Washington rebuts poison gas charge' in *NY Times*, 10 March 1963; second quotation: 'Soviet assails U.S. on war chemicals' in *NY Times*, 14 Aug. 1968.
70 Tucker, *War of nerves,* pp. 190–2.

1962 and 1968 the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* together published more than two dozen reports on Egypt's chemical warfare in the Yemen. None of them mentioned 'weapons of mass destruction'.

Most strikingly, in contrast with the Bush administration's statements in 2002–03 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 1982 through the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 Iraqi forces launched repeated chemical attacks against Iranian combatants. In late 1987 the Iraqi army began a chemical warfare campaign against civilians in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq; the most devastating of these attacks targeted the town of Halabja, killing several thousand people.[71] The Iraqi use of poison gas received substantial press coverage. In 1988 alone the *New York Times*, the Washington *Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* published 53 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 US 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 radioactive ones. The phrase was absent from media accounts of chemical warfare in Vietnam, Yemen, and, remarkably, Iraq. Thus, during the Cold War it was unlikely that even a highly attentive US citizen could have given a specific description of 'WMD' 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'.[72]

IV "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 adopted in 1991,[73] 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, 'WMD' had seeped into the discourse of *domestic* US law, where its meaning was 'transposed' again.

Re-Enhancement

The perception that 'WMD' proliferation critically endangered the United States was not invented by the George W. Bush administration. This threat assessment actually emerged during the presidency of George H.W. Bush, when the winding down of the US-Soviet nuclear competition gave the US arms control community an opportunity to pursue a more expansive agenda of chemical and biological disarmament throughout the developing

71 Ibid., pp. 249–59, 268–72, 279–82.
72 Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche,* p. 47.
73 UN Doc. S/RES/687, Resolution 687 (1991) of 3 April 1991.

world. The arms controllers began to use the term WMD interchangeably with biological and especially chemical weapons.[74] The adoption of this locution had the rhetorical effect of dramatizing the menace posed by chemical weapons and de-legitimizing these weapons.

Ironically, in their quest to delegitimize the possession of chemical weapons by developing countries arms controllers were able to seize on the rhetoric of Third World leaders themselves, especially Saddam Hussein.[75] During the Iran-Iraq war Iraqi officials made veiled analogies between chemical weapons and the atomic bomb. In 1982, for example, an Iraqi diplomat threatened that 'Iraq will use a new secret weapon of mass destruction if the Iranians launch a major offensive on the border'.[76] When the war ended, Hussein re-directed this rhetoric against Israel, warning that 'Whoever threatens us with the atomic bomb, we will annihilate him with the dual [binary] chemical', and that Iraq 'would respond to any Israeli use of weapons of mass destruction . . . by using comparable weapons against Israel'.[77] After invading Kuwait in August 1990 Iraqi leaders employed similar language to deter the US from attacking Iraq.[78]

US leaders replied in kind, reinforcing the rhetorical conflation of chemical and nuclear weapons. In August 1990 President George H.W. Bush declared that 'the use of chemical weapons . . . would be intolerable and would be dealt with very, very severely', while Defense Secretary Dick Cheney later warned that 'were Saddam Hussein foolish enough to use weapons of mass destruction, the US response would be absolutely overwhelming and it would be devastating'.[79] Interestingly, although George H.W. Bush, unlike his son in 2002–03, 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 Bill Clinton administration and be used with a vengeance by the George W. Bush administration. In November 1990 President George H.W. Bush, glossing over the past reluctance of his administration to denounce Iraq's use of poison gas, depicted Hussein as a 'Dictator who has 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 reality of that situation and the gravity of the threat'.[80] Several days later Bush said that Hussein was 'a dangerous dictator all too willing to use force, who has weapons of mass destruction and is seeking new ones'.[81]

The US and Iraqi rhetoric combined 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 3 April 1991, which set the terms of the Gulf War ceasefire, firmed up the re-enhanced picture when its preamble stated that the Security Council was conscious of '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

74 Hymans, 'Roots', p. 38.
75 Price, *Chemical weapons taboo*, chap. 6.
76 Ibid., p. 137.
77 First quotation: Cowell, A., 'Iraq chief, boasting of poison gas, warns of disaster if Israelis strike' in *NY Times*, 3 April 1990. Second quotation: Cowell, A., 'Iraqi takes harsh line at meeting' in *NY Times*, 29 May 1990.
78 Price, *Chemical weapons taboo*, p. 148.
79 Ibid.
80 'Excerpts from speech by Bush at Marine post' in *NY Times*, 23 Nov. 1990.
81 'Excerpts from President's news conference on crisis in Gulf' in *NY Times*, 1 Dec. 1990.

weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, in the future. 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'.[82]

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 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 US press rose significantly in the 1990s.[83] Furthermore, most references to 'WMD' were in the context of Iraq—that country was mentioned in 895 of the 1271 *New York Times* articles that referred to 'WMD' in the 1990s. The presence of 'WMD' in the media and the phrase's association with Iraq became especially intense in 1998, when repeated confrontations between the Iraqi regime and UNSCOM's inspectors culminated in a massive bombing campaign by the US and UK against Iraq.[84] 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 describe 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'.[85] Defense Secretary William Cohen similarly denounced Hussein for having "use[d] weapons of mass destruction against his own

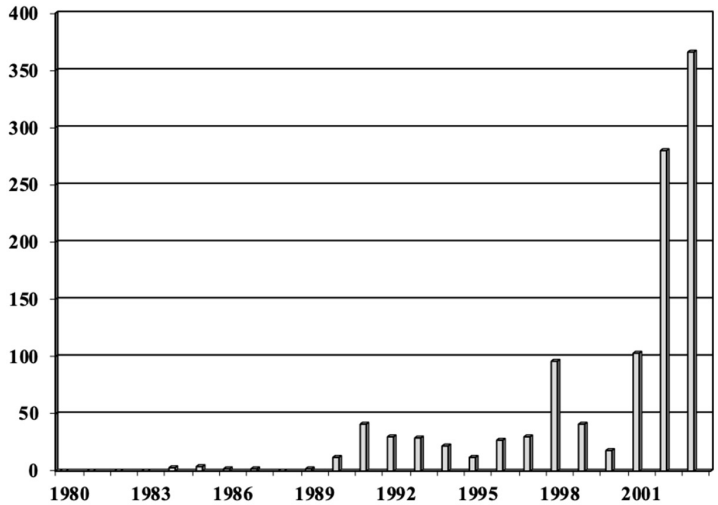

Figure 2: *Frequency of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' in the Wall Street Journal, 1980-2003*

Source: Factiva.com

82 UN Doc. S/RES/687, Resolution 687 (1991) of 3 April 1991.
83 The data for figure 2 were generated by using the Factiva.com search engine.
84 Tucker, *War of nerves*, p. 357.
85 'Transcript of the State of the Union message from President Clinton' in *NY Times,* 28 Jan. 1998.

people'.[86]

It is clear, then, that in the 1990s foreign policy professionals, though they were not necessarily aware of the UN Commission for Conventional Armaments' 1948 resolution defining 'weapons of mass destruction',[87] have had a picture of 'WMD' in their heads that more or less mirrored the UN's definition. To the extent that it has registered in the mind of the general public, however, the resolution of the picture has been far lower than that of the image harbored by experts. In November 1997 *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter admitted that 'until recently' he 'didn't know' the meaning of 'weapons of mass destruction'. He wrote that this 'bureaucratic shorthand' was 'widely known inside the government, but right now it's barely a blip in the public consciousness'.[88] A few months later in April 1998 *New York Times* columnist William Safire, too, felt compelled to explain this shorthand. 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?'[89] 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 US 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 Safire's choice 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 detailed description 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 an 'update' on Iraq, is another indication that the minds of many Americans contained no high-resolution image of the concept.[90]

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 the passage by Congress of the 'Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994'.[91] President Clinton campaigned successfully for including in this law a ban on manufacture, transfer, and possession of semi-automatic assault rifles,

86 'Standoff with Iraq; war of words' in *NY Times,* 19 Feb. 1998. See also Hymans, 'Roots of the Washington threat consensus', p. 39.

87 According to William Safire, 'Most arms control buffs think [WMD] is probably a Russian term'. See 'On language: weapons of mass destruction' in *NY Times,* 19 April 1998.

88 'Why this is not a drill' in *Newsweek,* 17 Nov. 1997.

89 'On language: weapons of mass destruction'.

90 'Fighting in Iraq; the big story' in *Washington Post,* 8 July 2003.

91 The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, Public Law 103–322, 13 September 1994; Clymer, A., 'Decision in the Senate: the overview' in *NY Times*, 26 Aug. 1994.

which Clinton repeatedly dubbed 'weapons of mass destruction'.[92]

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, outlawed the use, attempt, or conspiracy to use 'weapons of mass destruction' against any person or federal property in the US, as well as against US nationals or federal property overseas.[93] Curiously, the definition of 'WMD' in this legislation was far broader than the common meaning 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'.[94] 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'.[95] 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 distinguished between 'WMD' and 'conventional' armament, the violent crime act of 1994 obliterated this distinction.

Soon federal prosecutors began pressing 'WMD' charges against terrorists suspected of using conventional 'destructive devices'. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who in 1995 detonated a fertilizer bomb in front of the federal building in Oklahoma City, were charged with the use of 'WMD'.[96] Richard Reid, who tried in 2001 to detonate a 'shoe bomb' on a commercial airliner, pled guilty to a 'WMD' charge.[97] And, as Attorney General John Ashcroft announced in 2004, two suspects were indicted by US prosecutors on 'WMD' charges for hurling hand grenades into two Bogota restaurants, resulting in the injury of five Americans.[98] 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.[99] In 2006, for example, a federal judge sentenced a Pennsylvania man to a lengthy prison term after he pleaded guilty to charges that included the 'use of a weapon of mass destruction'.[100] As the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, the man was unhappy with a surgery he underwent in Chicago. He built a 'bomb out of black gunpowder, a carbon dioxide cartridge, a nine-volt battery, a model rocket

92 Wines, M., 'Clinton renewing push for assault rifle ban' in *NY Times*, 26 April 1994; 'Clinton campaigns for weapons ban in letter to hunters' in *NY Times*, 1 May 1994.

93 The text of the law is posted at https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/3355/text.

94 The United States Code, Title 18 Crimes and Criminal Procedure, Part I Crimes, Chapter 113B Terrorism, Section 2332a Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

95 The United States Code, Title 18 Crimes and Criminal Procedure, Part I Crimes, Chapter 44 Firearms, Section 921 Definitions.

96 'Indictment against Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols', at http://newsok.com/article/2510970.

97 Belluck, P., 'Unrepentant shoe bomber sentenced to life', *NY Times*, 31 Jan. 2003.

98 'Second FARC terrorist Indicted for 2003 grenade attack on Americans in Colombia', US Department of Justice news release, at http://justice.gov/opa/pr/2004/October/04_crm_724.htm.

99 Carus, *Defining,* p. 10.

100 'Botched penis surgery ends in mail-bomb to doc', *Associated Press*, 22 Nov. 2006, at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15849599/.

igniter, and dental floss'. Shortly after mailing the bomb to the surgeon the man confessed his crime to the police, which intercepted the package and disarmed it with a water cannon. As the man's attorney complained, because the prosecutors pressed WMD charges against his client, he faced a harsher sentence than he would 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'.[101]

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.[102] 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[103]—the subsequent adoption of this concept by state legislatures resulted in 'minute deviations' that sometimes extended the concept beyond its federal definition. In recent years many states have passed legislation criminalizing 'weapons of mass destruction'. While some of these state laws duplicated the language of the US Criminal Code, other states adopted definitions that deviated from it in minute but significant ways. For example, Florida Statute 790.166 broadens the federal definition of chemical weapons. If Title 18 of the US Criminal Code describes a WMD as 'any weapon that is designed or intended to cause death or serious bodily injury through the release, dissemination, or impact of toxic or poisonous chemicals, or their precursors',[104] 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'.[105]

Minute though this textual deviation might have been, it apparently touched the life of one hapless Floridian, who was arrested in 2006 and 'accused of rigging a "weapon of mass destruction" to spew hazardous substances' into a sex shop. The man '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'. According to the suspect, 'the substance was a mixture of swamp water, yeast, laundry soap and rotten eggs'.[106]

The wide discrepancy between 'WMD' *qua* an existential national security threat 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', attests to the historically-contingent, legally-fuzzy, and politically- contestable meaning of this concept.

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

This section focuses on the run-up to the Iraq War, when 'WMD' became the staple of the campaign to sell the war to the American people. We argue that the Bush administration's

101 Shiffman, J., 'Unhappy over surgery, he now faces prison' in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 April 2006.
102 Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', p. 81.
103 Carus, *Defining,* p. 32.
104 The United States Code, Title 18 Crimes and Criminal Procedure, Part I Crimes, Chapter 113B Terrorism, Section 2332a Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction.
105 Ibid., appendix D; emphases added.
106 'Arrest made over rigged device at Waldo sex shop', in *Gainesville Sun*, 6 Dec. 2006.

claim that Iraq had (or used) WMD should be understood not as a 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, reinforcement, abbreviation, 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'.[107]

Condensation

To highlight the dangerous character of the Iraqi regime, US officials frequently referred to the Iraqi chemical attacks in the 1980s. These officials alternated between stating that Iraq 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 discussed earlier, '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 weapon types 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, in other words, has practiced rhetorical c*ondensation*: employing a single verbal symbol (WMD) to unify a diversity of meanings (nukes; gas). [108]

As Nietzsche observed, however, 'the unity of the word does not guarantee the unity of the thing'.[109] Indeed, the disparate nature of chemical and nuclear weapons has been noted by prominent experts and observers. For example, two prominent scientists pointed out that nuclear and chemical weapons 'are fundamentally different in terms of lethality, in the area they cover' and in the availability of protective measures against them. Whereas a single nuclear weapon 'can physically destroy an entire city instantaneously', chemical weapons 'do not destroy property' and they 'may cause hundreds, but probably not thousands, of deaths'.[110]

Alas, these experts' voices have been drowned out by the chorus of war rhetoric conducted by the administration. By repeatedly declaring that the Iraqis used/possessed 'WMD' the Bush administration effectively associated the Iraqi threat with nuclear weapons even as administration officials stopped short of claiming that Iraq actually had these terrible weapons. The condensation of chemical and nuclear weapons into a single phrase thus rhetorically magnified 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 can win a campaign to

107 Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche,* p. 47.
108 Kertzer, *Ritual,* p. 11.
109 Nietzsche, *Human,* p. 19.
110 Morrison and Tsipis, 'Rightful names', p. 77. See also Enemark, 'Farewell'.

construct reality without rhetorical reinforcements.[111] 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 8 September 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'.[112] A month later, President Bush repeated this portentous phrase in a televised speech in Cincinnati.[113] Other administration officials, too, incorporated the 'mushroom cloud' image into their rhetoric. The reinforcement of the metonym WMD by this dramatic image, as well as 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 US national security.

Abbreviation

The third rhetorical practice that served to embellish 'weapons of mass destruction' in 2002–03 was the transposition of this flabby phrase into a trim acronym.[114] As figure 3 indicates, whereas the acronym WMD almost never appeared in major US newspapers in the 1990s, during the lead-up to the Iraq War the same publications printed it hundreds of times.[115] Furthermore, as the war approached, the acronym became so ubiquitous that reporters and commentators no longer felt compelled to spell it out.

As Herbert Marcuse explained, abbreviations perform a rhetorical function of 'help[ing] to repress undesired questions'.[116] For example, substituting NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization represses 'questions about the membership of Greece and Turkey' while 'UN dispenses with un due emphasis on "united"'.[117] Similarly, by dispensing with

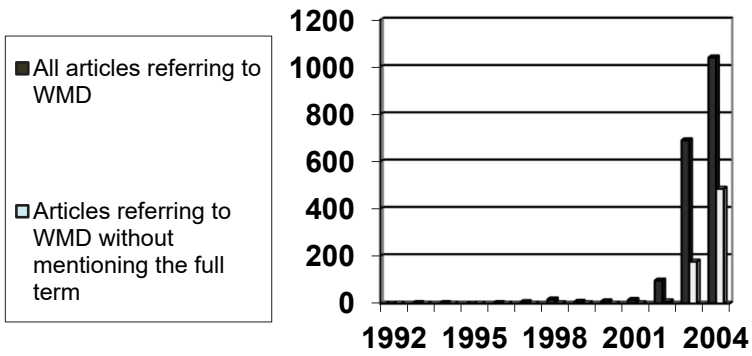

Figure 3: *Frequency of the Acronym WMD in Major US Publications*

Source: Factiva.com

111 Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche,* p. 47; emphasis added.

112 See http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/01/10/wbr.smoking.gun/.

113 'President Bush outlines Iraqi threat', at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html.

114 Although, for convenience, we used it in this essay in reference to earlier periods, the acronym WMD was created by UNSCOM in the early 1990s, then migrated to US political discourse. See Bentley, *Weapons*, pp. 91–2.

115 The data for figures 3-5 were generated by searching the 'major news and business publications–US' data base at the Factiva.com search engine.

116 Marcuse, *One-dimensional man,* p. 94.

117 Ibid.

the words 'mass destruction' the acronym 'WMD' helped 'repress undesired questions' such as: can poison gas cause mass destruction even as gas cannot destroy property? Did Iraq's chemical attacks against 'its own people' actually cause mass destruction? Could the use of chemical weapons by Iraq truly pose a grave danger to US security? 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 serves merely for recognition of an unquestionable fact'.[118]

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 constituted the most important way in which this metonym was 'embellished poetically and rhetorically' in 2002–03. Beginning in January 2002, the president and senior administration officials uttered this figure of speech multiple times in most of their public appearances.[119] In the CNN appearance in which she introduced the 'mushroom cloud' metaphor, National Security Advisor Rice uttered 'weapons of mass destruction' 13 times. President Bush's Fort Hood speech contained eight utterances of this expression, including five packed into the short paragraph quoted at the beginning of this essay. And Secretary of State Colin Powell alluded to 'weapons of mass destruction' 17 times in his widely-watched February 2003 address to the UN Security Council.[120]

The press echoed and amplified the administration's WMD rhetoric. As figure 2 illustrates, the frequency with which the *Wall Street Journal* printed this phrase spiked dramatically in 2002 and 2003. Similarly, in the *New York Times* the frequency of articles containing this phrase jumped from 60 in 2000 to 524 in 2002 and 853 in 2003. And, as figure 4 shows, in the 12 months preceding the invasion of Iraq, the frequency of 'weapons of mass destruction' in the US press has 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'.[121]

Sigmund Freud wrote that 'Repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure'.[122] Perhaps because of the innate pleasure associated with it, repetition is a common feature of multiple cultural forms. The 'repetition of a sound, syllable, word, phrase, stanza, or metrical pattern is a basic unifying device of all poetry'.[123] 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'.[124] Similarly, 'repetition, repetition, repetition' is a cardinal rule of effective political campaigning.[125]

Repetition is also central to religious ritual and liturgy. Modes of repetition in contemporary songwriting may have their roots in 'primitive religious chants from all cultures', which 'develop[ed] into cadence and song'.[126] Repetition remains 'one of the

118 Ibid.
119 Gershkoff and Kushner, 'Shaping', p. 531.
120 'Full text of Colin Powell's speech', *Guardian*, 5 Feb. 2003.
121 Barber, *Fear's empire*, p. 29.
122 Quoted in Tannen, *Talking voices*, p. 94.
123 Fogle, 'Repetition', p. 228.
124 Cook, *Discourse*, p. 227.
125 Luntz, *Words*, p. 11.
126 Fogle, 'Repetition', p. 228.

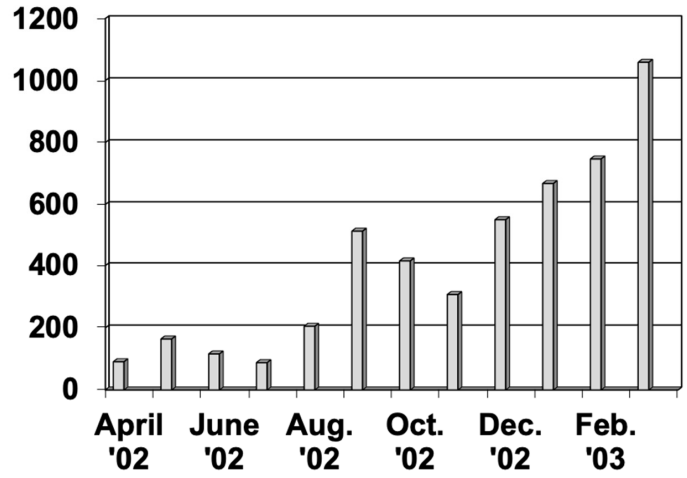

Figure 4: *Monthly Frequencies of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' in Major US Publications During the Run-Up to War*

Source: Factiva.com

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'.[127] The texts of prayers regularly recited by adherents of various religions feature such incantatory rhythms. 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.[128]

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. Shortly after the invasion began, political journalist Michael Kinsley observed that

> 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.[129]

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

[127] Bamford, *You can say that again*, pp. 77–79.
[128] Bamford, *You can say that again*, pp. 77–79.
[129] Kinsley, M., 'Low opinion: did Iraq have weapons of mass destruction? It doesn't matter' in *Slate*, 19 June 2003, http://www.slate.com/id/2084602/.

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 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.[130]

VI 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.[131]

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 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 declaration, which resulted in the introduction of 'all 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 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.[132]

The failure to discover 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq did not banish the term from national security discourse. The national security strategies of the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations both depicted 'WMD' proliferation as a major threat to US security.[133] Nevertheless, as figure 5 illustrates, after peaking in 2003 the incidence of the phrase in the US press has fallen back to roughly its level in the 1990s. This trend mirrored a decline in the official usage of 'WMD'. The Bush administration used the concept far more sparingly during its second term (2005-2009) than before. President Obama, though he repeatedly referred to North Korea's nuclear weapons as 'WMD', only rarely included this phrase in his rhetoric surrounding the lethal use of chemical weapons by Syria's Bashar

130 We present a theoretical elaboration of this claim in Oren and Solomon, 'WMD, WMD, WMD'.
131 Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 46–7.
132 Ibid.
133 Bentley, *Weapons*, pp. 111–12; 'National Security Strategy of the USA', Dec. 2017, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

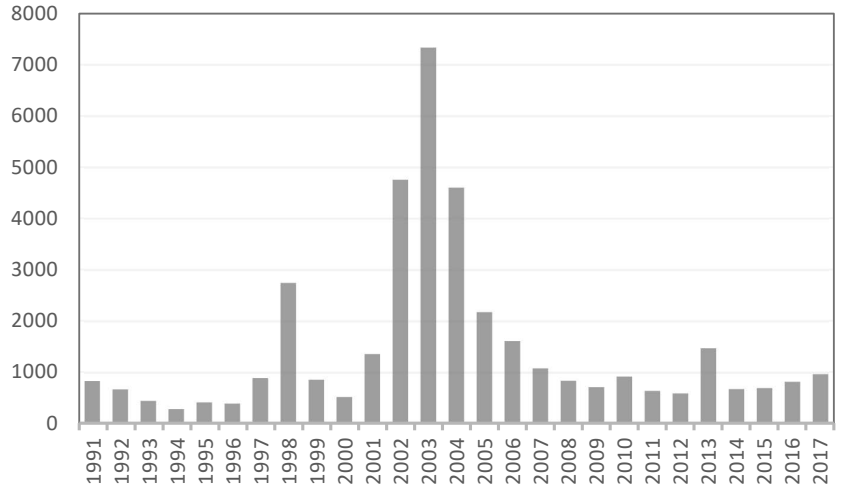

Figure 5. *Frequency of 'weapons of mass destruction' in major US publications, 1991-2017*

Source: Factiva.com

al-Assad regime in 2012 and 2013.[134] Similarly, in April 2017 President Trump avoided referring to 'WMD' even as he publicly condemned the Assad regime's 'horrible chemical attack on innocent civilians' and authorized a punitive airstrike on a Syrian airfield.[135]

The Iraq WMD fiasco did not only reduce the incidence of WMD talk, it 'lessened the political weight of the concept as a rhetorical resource'.[136] In significant part the rhetorical power of the phrase has been undercut by its entry into the realm of popular culture. After the invasion 'WMD' has become the object of satire (as evidenced by Kinsley's above-quoted essay) and the butt of jokes. The 2004 Hollywood comedy *Team America: World Police* parodied a US-led police force pursuing terrorists armed with North Korean 'WMD'.[137] A March 2004 episode of the TV mob drama *The Sopranos* featured a character who, when asked by the authorities to open his garage, wisecracked: 'That's where I make my weapons of mass destruction'.[138] And the plot of a 2006 episode of *The Simpsons* featured aliens who used the claim that humans were manufacturing 'weapons of mass disintegration' as an excuse to invade Earth.[139]

So long as the memory of the Iraq WMD debacle does not vanish, and so long as the phrase WMD remains the object of satire and comedy, its potential as a rhetorical rallying cry in the context of US national security policy remains greatly diminished. The discourse of US foreign policy, however, contains other equally ambiguous and potentially-infectious phrases that, unlike 'WMD', have not been discredited yet and thus remain available to be 'embellished poetically and rhetorically': rogue states, failed states, ethnic cleansing,

134 Bentley, *Weapons*, pp. 110–12; Bentley, *Syria*, p. 90.
135 National Public Radio, 'Trump orders Syria airstrikes after 'Assad choked out the lives' of civilians', 6 April 2017, at https://www.npr.org/2017/04/06/522948481/u-s-launches-airstrikes-against-syria-after-chemical-attack
136 Bentley, *Weapons*, p. 111.
137 Ibid., p. 95.
138 'All Happy Families...', *The Sopranos*, Season 5 Episode 4, March 28, 2004.
139 'Treehouse of Horror XVII', *The Simpsons*, Season 18 Episode 4, November 5, 2006.

border security, and regime change come to mind. Should the current or future administrations begin spouting off one of these phrases (or adopt new ones) to drum up support for military action, one would hope that the ensuing policy debate would focus on the meaning, history, and rhetorical function of the phrase as much as on its factual accuracy.

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