

Foreign Policy Discourses  
of the Obama Years

Melinda Kovács

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*For my great loves, Chandler and Julian.*

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## Chapter 1

# Politics, Discourse, Policy

### DISCOURSE MAKES POLICY PLAUSIBLE

Politics is discursive. It is a field in which more or less public rules govern a more or less public process of making, maintaining, and changing meanings. By more or less public rules I refer to what Wittgenstein would call the rules of the language game.<sup>1</sup> By more or less public process I mean that some aspects of politics are fully publicly accessible while others require inquiry to be exposed. This process is how meaning evolves in politics. In an earlier attempt to define the discursivity of politics, I arrived at the following:

Discourse does not accompany politics. It forms the very core of politics, makes it possible, and anchors its ontology. Politics exists in and through discourse. Discourse is the process and practice of making meaning. It is a process because it is perpetual and never completed or “done.” It is a practice because it is public and communal. Neither individual nor private versions could exist. Discourse entails language but it is not mere language. Discourse can be verbal and non-verbal. It can be textual or visual or behavioral (as an example of the latter, consider the case of secret handshakes). (Kovács 2015: 8)

The evolution in meaning is reflected in discourse but at the same time it is also made possible by the discourse. While there are undeniably physical elements of politics (rockets, dead bodies, poison gases as well as meeting venues, voting machines, buildings, pamphlets, etc.) as well as less tangible staples like procedures to follow or international law, the process through which those elements mean anything resides in discourse. Discourse makes politics possible; it allows us to learn meanings as well as to participate in creating meanings and to delineate the boundaries of our political community.

Where things begin to mean something different from the prevailing meanings that we function with, is where our political community ends. Thus discourse is not referential: it is not a collection of names for things in the political world but rather a creative, productive field blessed and cursed with fluidity. This fluidity allows for input and evolution, elasticity and inclusion while at the same time also carrying the possibility for frustration and danger.

My earlier inquiry into the nature of politics being akin to the nature of the language game as Wittgenstein describes it, meant that applying traits of language games to politics "elucidates the discursive ontology of politics" (Kovács 2015: 10). Specifically:

A language game is communication, interaction, and community. It involves people talking to one another and acting together, creating, and learning / teaching meanings in the process. ... A language game delineates a human community. In the course of mapping its traits onto politics, I make no claims about an inherent similarity that we will perceive if we stare at language and politics long and hard enough. The mapping exercise I propose is akin to the Wittgensteinian project of persuasion as seeing things in new ways: understood in terms of a language game, politics will look different. (Kovács 2015:10)

The traits of language games that I mapped onto politics were nonconsensuality (both language games and politics go on when we enter the world), activity-centeredness (neither one is a purely theoretical endeavor), learning by doing (learning a native language is not unlike the process of acquiring political views), plurality (there are multiple games going on at any given time), family resemblances (no fixed essence), and rule-following.

The stake of the ontological maneuver is the same: it is, in Wittgensteinian terms, to note the language game, or to catch meanings in the process of changing. It is to discover how and why something can happen in politics. Before something is done in politics it has to be or become plausible. The path to political plausibility is one of discourse. Whether in linguistic, visual, or other types of discourse such as the use of physical space, meaning, concepts, and strategies must be constructed such that they amount to a tapestry of plausibility. Schaller (2006) claims that discourses warrant policy practices. Based on the work of Milliken and Fairclough, Schaller points out that discourses offer ways in which "the world is organized and understood, and ultimately make possible certain policy actions, while rendering others impossible" (Schaller 45).

Discourse analysis as a tool to elucidate foreign policy concepts appears to be a fairly well-established practice. This especially appears to be the case in the scholarship about the United States after September 11, 2001. Sometimes, it is possible that works from opposite ideological and methodological camps

still come to the identical conclusion that discourse and policy are connected. Bentley (2013) studies the concept of "weapons of mass destruction" in American security discourse and wants to introduce the idea that the definition of weapon of mass destruction is not static but rather changes over time. She states that in the case of weapon of mass destruction, we must understand "definition as a political act in itself and not merely a form of conceptual clarification" (Bentley 74). Given my understanding of discourse, this is true of all concepts in politics. And everywhere else. Still, Bentley knows that those who will see discourse as constructive, and not only as constructed as an outcome of strategic intent, will disagree with her focus on intent. I certainly fall in the category of finding her position on intent problematic. Nonetheless, it is significant that support for considering the link between discourse and policy comes from vastly different positions regarding the nature of discourse.

Occasionally, the link between discourse and policy is validated by rather acrobatic maneuvers to mask, hide, or "forget" certain policy actions to clear space for new discourses to emerge and a new type of policy action to follow. Laffey and Weldes (2004) document how US foreign policy in the Middle East had to be made the object of forgetting and suppression in order to mask the fact that the September 11 attacks were a likely response to those policies. Once the suppression and forgetting were complete, the "why do they hate us?" discourse became plausible, along with a construal of the attacks as targeting all of civilization. Their focus on this "forgetting" underscores that, for policies and new discourses to emerge, a congenial discursive stage has to be set. Failing that (because policy actions by the United States in the Middle East well before 2001 limit the amount of contradictory discourses that can emerge), the illusion of a blank slate will do. Then September 11 will appear as being out of the blue and "why do they hate us?" becomes a meaningful question. It also becomes an anchor for a discourse in which the United States is a righteous victim, and a discourse that warrants a new set of policy actions in the Middle East. The connection between foreign policy and discourse is nothing if not an intricate one.

This intricate relationship is so complex precisely because causality in a linear sense probably does not exist. Discursive strategies, policy actions, and exceptional discursive products like presidential speeches are interconnected in a web rather than being elements in a flow chart of causation. Ayyash (2007) reviews the process of debates and ideas leading to the appearance of a specific discourse that then warrants and morphs into foreign policy: "The chief architects of this discourse began formulating their ideas during the latter part of the 1980s, but these ideas did not materialize into a concrete plan for American defense and foreign policy until the late 1990s" (Ayyash 613). Ayyash found in his analysis of neoconservative discourse that discursive strategies are closely mirrored in US foreign policy actions and presidential

speeches. These types of speeches are privileged and exceptional items of discourse and their status is central to the project at hand.

Given that research indicates that consistent discursive practices make certain foreign policy moves plausible (Milliken 1999; Schaller 2006), I chose a methodology relying on qualitative discourse analysis to specifically demonstrate how foreign policy actions are made possible and plausible in and by discourse. Numerous authors have pointed out that the connection between discourse and policy is one we disregard at our peril if we seek understanding.

## RESEARCHING US FOREIGN POLICY

The literature on US foreign policy is dauntingly expansive. This rich literature may appear as the obvious choice of a context or reference point for my work here. There are in fact relevant insights and works that I cannot fail to mention. And yet, these works are not necessarily the disciplinary home of my inquiry here. My commitment, first and foremost, is to the discursive ontology of politics and as a consequence, the study of political meanings as they emerge and change. My chosen subject matter here is of unique relevance to the study of American politics and that relevance explains my choice of topic. Therefore I will not claim primary expertise in foreign policy but rather claim the mantle of Wittgensteinian analysis in the realm of foreign policy. In this realm, I would like to focus on three subtypes of inquiry: works with somewhat cognate approaches that focus on a timeframe different from mine or concentrate on a different topic; works focusing on the Obama years but not on foreign policy discourse; and works about the Obama years with an overlap in focus or approach. These three genres illustrate the relevance of a diversity of approaches in any subfield of political inquiry, including foreign policy.

Cognate approaches to American foreign policy cover works that address the role of discourse and subscribe to a social constructivist rather than referential view of meaning. Such an approach is not entirely frequent in the subdiscipline: impressive recent overviews of the entire practice of American foreign policy without explicitly referencing discourse, such as O'Connor (2010), seem more of a rule than an exception. Thus the review of cognate approaches to the analysis of US foreign policy is relevant even when it covers a timeframe different from the Obama years.

The claim that discourse ought to play a role in the analysis of politics and policy is well supported by an entire series of works. Be it claims that the realities of the international political scene include language and metaphors (Beer and De Landtsheer 2004) or arguments that discourses are sometimes able to tap into affect and thereby shift responses to policies like the war on

terror (Solomon 2014), it is increasingly frequently stated that examining documents with an empirical methodology geared to discourse will serve as a crucial addition to foreign policy theory (Ganji 2014). It is also becoming easier to find works based on the methodological credo that presidential studies and discourse analysis ought to be merged (Austermühl 2014).

Most often, the works that feature what would be a cognate approach to my inquiry here tend to focus on US foreign policy of at least a few years prior to my concentration or on a topic different from the foreign policy discourses created by the United States. Rozman's inquiry (2012) into how China's discourse of its own identity is expected to hinder some foreign policy efforts and diplomacy by the United States is certainly a cognate approach but focuses on the uptake of US foreign policy rather than its production. Smith's (2005) work uncovers how the policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East has been counterproductive because the United States polarized the discourse and once the concept of democracy got distorted, it became difficult to impossible to push for democracy internally but does not cover the years I am interested in. Similarly, Freeman (2010), Maguire (2009), Nolan and MacEachin (2006), Croft (2006), Gardner (2005), as well as Artz and Kamalipour (2005) feature cognate approaches but center on timeframes different from mine.

The second type of foreign policy inquiry that illustrates the relevance of my work as well as similar investigations consists of books on President Obama's tenure in office but not focusing on foreign policy discourse. One rather obvious thread in the tapestry of this literature is biographical in nature—either in the vein of personal fascination or in terms of focusing on campaign strategies from Mr. Obama, but still focusing on the person or his assessment. This inquiry is exemplified by Ruebner (2013), Grunwald (2012), Scott-Smith (2012), Bruce and Cunnigen (2010), Halperin (2010), Reed (2009), Webb (2009), Wolffe (2009), and Tufankjian (2008).

Focusing on somewhat similar subject matter is the characteristic of the third category of writing. This group contains works that analyze President Obama's tenure in office with somewhat overlapping focus areas. Delgado Crespo (2002) and Simpson-Gray (2012) illustrate the enduring nature of this interest. Delgado Crespo specifically addresses security discourse but his time frame is earlier than what I investigate. Simpson-Gray's work addresses an overlapping time period and an overlapping policy area, but does not share my focus on discourse making policy plausible.

A more clearly overlapping approach is found in Managhan (2012). Her work chronicles the history of one specific discourse (motherhood) in twentieth-century US foreign policy and thereby strongly supports both the discourse-policy link and the methodology of discourse analysis. Her emphasis on the Gulf War, however, means that her inquiry sets the stage

for, rather than competes with my work. The type of examination of the foreign policy of the Obama years that has recently been the "rule" is like the work of Gerges (2011): explicitly focusing on the Middle East but restricting itself to the beginning of the first Obama administration's tenure in office and not featuring the type of focus on discourse that I endorse. Similarly, Carter (2011) addresses key foreign policy issues and President Obama's changing approaches, but only focuses on the first two years of the first term.

In the area of more ontologically oriented inquiries, it is still not entirely frequent to find versions of ontologies that are compatible with my Wittgensteinian focus. Miskimmon et al. (2015) provide helpful guidelines to interrogate the place and relevance of discourse in the analysis of international relations. They insist that actors in international relations are engaged in self-reflection to a certain extent. They claim that if actors cannot reflect on the constitution of their own subjectivity, then politics and history are nothing but direct consequences of discourse. They reject that since they know from practitioners of international relations that there are moments of decision and choice involved in opting for certain narratives.

The specific way in which they maintain intentionality leads to an ontology of discourse that is significantly different from mine. I support an understanding of discourse that is significantly more expansive and pervasive. I posit that discourse permeates all of the field of politics because it is pervasive enough to permeate all of human experience. The subjectivity that Miskimmon et al. (2015) offer as an object of reflection is discursive in nature. Where they claim "scholars of discourse ... ask how political conditions came to be structured in such a way that what we know as actors or structures or communication or causation are understood and taken for granted in the manner they are" and expect that these "analysts would ask ... how nations and interests come to be conceptualized the way they have been" (Miskimmon et al. 2015: 342), I want to focus on the ways in which US foreign policy came to be conceptualized in a specific way in the Obama years.

Krebs and Jackson (2007) present an argument for the centrality of rhetoric and persuasion in the analysis of international relations. They intend to bracket the issue of the motivations of speakers and they advance a model of rhetorical coercion. This coercion works "not by persuading one's opponents of the rectitude of one's stance, but by denying them the rhetorical means out of which to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal" (Krebs and Jackson 2007: 42). As they explain, "it does not matter whether actors believe what they say, whether they are motivated by crass material interests or sincere commitment. What is important is that they can be rhetorically maneuvered into a corner, trapped into publicly endorsing positions they may, or may not, find anathema" (Krebs and Jackson 2007: 42). Although this is a very attractive

model, it also maintains distinctions among each of intention, utterances, or public performance of rhetoric, political action, and outcomes. While I certainly would not want to argue that these distinctions do not exist, I do want to point out that these distinctions are ways of slicing up a continuum. For all the elements of the foregoing list are discursive in nature, all the way from intention to political outcomes.

A very similar reliance on rhetorical coercion as a model is featured in Krebs and Lobasz (2007). Similar values and similar concerns apply from my perspective: discursivity is not given sufficient emphasis and the creativity of discourse is not fully acknowledged. The valuable and yet incomplete discursivity of political analysis in this mode is best illustrated by Krebs' work on narrative.

Krebs (2015) identifies the interplay of what a president or other political actor is able to say and the setting or context in which they speak, as the key variable in determining the success or failure of a chosen narrative. Presidential storytelling, he finds, is successful in the domain of national security during periods of uncertainty when there are no dominant narratives in place. Although Krebs does seem to maintain a conceptual structure in which orators choose freely and with agency, among narratives available to them, his insight here is valuable. Adding discursive constitution to subject positions as well as to narratives turns his model into an explanation of when and how language games shift and how meanings change. If discursive creativity is elevated and accorded more productivity in an analysis, this is fruitful approach. Specifically, as Wittgenstein points out in *On Certainty*, language games do change (para 256) and what does not change does not endure because it is quintessentially unmovable but because its surroundings and contexts hold it in place (OC para 144). The element I wish to add to Krebs' insight is that speakers and audiences do not have different levels of agency or independence but are rather united in what I call communities of meaning. "That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life" (PI para 241).

The recognition that agreement about how to be in the world is at the center of political existence and therefore ought to guide analyses of international relations is the most relevant connection to other work. In an inspiring cognate approach, Doty (1993) outlines the move from "why" to "how" as a focus in analyzing foreign policy:

I examine how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others. What is explained is not *why* a particular outcome obtained, but rather *how* the subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible. (Doty 1993: 298)

In an effort to move away from referential theories of meaning, Doty (1993) elaborates the discursive practices approach that “does not presuppose that particular subjects are already in place. It thus does not look to individual or collective subjects as the loci of meaning. Regarding language practices themselves as relatively autonomous admits the question of a kind of power that constitutes subjects, modes of subjectivity and ‘reality’” (Doty 1993: 302). Simply put, discourses create subjects and position them with respect to one another. Doty chooses the discursive practice as the unit of analysis and expects that her approach will expand the understanding of what / where foreign policy is. Most helpfully, Doty declares that analysis must include more than official communications because the reception / uptake is also part of discursive success:

[F]oreign policy making can also extend beyond the realm of official government institutions. The reception as meaningful of statements revolving around policy situations depends on how well they fit into the general system of representation in a given society. Even speeches and press conference statements produced for specific purposes, in order to be taken seriously, must make sense and fit with what the general public takes as “reality.” Thus, the analysis of statements can entail the examination of what was said and written within broad policy-making contexts as well as statements made in society more generally. (Doty 1993: 303)

The expansive understanding of discursive practice is congenial to the ontology that I endorse. It does not, however, insulate from criticism. Holland’s (2011) criticism leveled at Doty brings up the issue of agency and that of audiences. In Holland’s way of asking these questions, the creativity and omnipresence of discourse are limited: he does not seem to be open to seeing audiences and agency as discursively constructed. In my take on the ontology of discourse, the discursivity of politics is based on the Wittgensteinian concept of the language game. There are participants in politics who engage in language games. They are not separated out into orators and audiences. Rather, they constitute communities of meaning. Playing the same language game is how members of a polity belong together. Those who make speeches and those who provide uptake all belong to the same community of meaning. Hence the central significance of the agreement about forms of life referenced above.

## CASE SELECTION AND CHAPTER STRUCTURE

To examine how discourse contributes to the possibility and plausibility of Obama’s foreign policy, I analyze publicly available speeches and news accounts of significant events. None of the material was called into being for

the sake of research. All of it existed prior to my inquiry and all of it was contributing to the process of making meanings, changing conceptualizations, and delineating the politically possible in American politics. These materials are therefore the most appropriate targets for sampling or biopsying (on which more on the next section) discourse. My goal in selecting the cases was to loosely follow a chronological order (from President Obama’s early speeches to air strikes against the Islamic State) and to also focus on events that have/had undeniable significance in the foreign policy of the time (from troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the death of bin Laden, to Syria and the fight against the Islamic State).

The most dramatic occurrences of President Obama’s tenure in office have certainly been instances of violence, policy actions in response to violence, and discursive production on a grand scale about the United States’ approach and strategy in these areas. This creates a skewed image that suggests that American foreign policy is mostly about responding to violence and mostly about the region of the world we commonly (and often mistakenly) refer to as the Middle East. The selection bias that leads me to focus on the biggest events appears to replicate the “if it bleeds, it leads” maxim of questionable quality journalism. Yet it appears that focusing on the events, situations, and time periods I have identified as being of interest allows me to trace the arch of President Obama’s foreign policy career. This is likely not the policy area with the most significance to the legacy the president will be known for among the American public—from health care to the Supreme Court, there are scores of domestic policy actions with more of a chance there. Yet, in terms of the role and standing of the United States on the world scene in the early twenty-first century, these policy actions and their surrounding discourses carry more significance and therefore they are the focus of my work here.

The specific chapters contain the following case studies:

Chapter 2 examines early speeches by President Obama around the time of his first election and then some of the significant speeches five years later. The granular analysis of the speeches themselves drives the analysis and the literature surrounds and supports the analytical work. Chapter 3 still focuses on speeches, this time about troop withdrawal from Iraq and troop surges in Afghanistan. The approach to the literature is somewhat different in this chapter than the previous one: in this case, I start by reviewing some of the relevant literature and refer back to it as a standard before analyzing the speeches.

Chapter 4 connects presidential speech making and news discourse by analyzing the announcement of bin Laden’s death in the context of both a lead-up discourse in news media and the breaking news coverage. The question that I examine here is the extent to which presidential speech making is capable of driving news discourse. Chapter 5 inquires into the news coverage regarding the House Special Committee report on the events in Benghazi. Once



again, the question is the extent to which news discourse may be responsive to privileged discourse makers although this time it is not the president but Congress that serves as the origin of the discourse. The relevance of this type of inquiry is that the major portion of public discourse in terms of numbers of users or participants as well as in terms of salience to the population resides in news media much more than in the speeches and messages of the president or Congress. Bluntly put, to the majority of those who make up popular sovereignty, news coverage is more immediate than presidential speeches or congressional reports.

Chapter 6 investigates a rather special case of news discourse: the reporting on Syria is an illustration that presidential discourse-making is sometimes unsuccessful because the media is able to take things said by a president and turn them into a rather different construct. The "red line" discourse about Syria shows that discourse can get away from presidents. As the next and final step in the succession of case studies, chapter 7 is focused not so much on discourse BY as ABOUT the United States. This case study involves the ISIS videos and the responses to them. Specifically, in this chapter I look at the path to, and justification for, intervention by the United States. The dynamic is of the United States being interpellated. Some elements of the discourse of interest are responsive and reactive in nature. As such, they reveal the interactivity of large-scale meaning making: a state and non-state actors, international conflict and violence are all elements of this drama of meaning.

### METHODOLOGY, BIOPSY, AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Wodak (2006 b) warns that the general public is routinely excluded from the interactions that lead to political decisions and that politics is mostly a staged performance. In her view, most analyses of politics replicate this exclusionary focus by inquiring only into the macro-level institutional processes of politics. She calls for a more micro-level focus in political analysis and argues for the relevance of micro-level inquiry inspired by an ethnographic attention to uptake as well as performance. The methodology I employ seeks to do just that. It is focused on the sites where meanings emerge, are offered to the public to endorse, and begin to be used as the constitutive outsides of communities of meaning.

My core methodological article of faith is that looking at different sites of discourse will give me useful insights because of the nature of discourse. I expect that discursive strategies and discursive regularities are so pervasive that they will be revealed regardless of the site where they are sampled. This is the essence of the "biopsy" analogy I like to use to describe my methodology.

The various sites allow me to identify the ongoing prevailing processes of meaning creation, meaning shift and therefore the evolving possibility and plausibility of policy action. While my case studies in each chapter are able to stand on their own in terms of findings, they are also the sites of the examination. Discourse is pervasive and permeates the entirety of the political space. It is the material from which the political space is constructed. Therefore, it is best studied from an internal perspective. The meanings of politics and policy are not imported from an external reality but created inside the discursive field. I realize that it is a value judgment or assumption or an axiom, even, to go with the meanings from within the process. I rely not on externally imposed interpretive frames but rather on emerging patterns of discourse. The axiom leads to the choice of a thick-description-inspired, hermeneutic approach.<sup>2</sup> The value of this approach is to unveil the dynamics of discourse. The dynamics of discourse (e.g., what it means for Syria to cross a "red line" versus what the media accounts say the president said) explain why and how foreign policy actions (no airstrikes at first but authorizing them later) fit together in a logical structure. What this type of analysis can ultimately do is serve as one pillar of a body of scholarship that tracks discursive strategies as indications of policy priorities and offers hints of what policy actions may rise in plausibility, and, as a consequence, in probability. What this type of analysis cannot do is provide a final authoritative account of the way things are. It is a narrative that I offer that is unique but it is not the only one that can offer insight. In reviewing core debates about analyzing discourse, Wodak (2006a) points out that analyses of discourse are not "right or wrong, just more or less adequate" (Wodak 2006a: 600). Additionally, no analysis is to be taken in isolation but rather placed in the context of other works. This is a strong version of my commitment to not seeking a final authoritative account but one narrative among several. Or, as Geertz (1973) would have put it, "another country heard from."

This work cannot claim to be uninfluenced by who did the analysis, when and where. It is not positivistic and does not aim at prediction. It results in a narrative emerging—a narrative of what meanings were cultivated in high-level, high-exposure discourse, how some of those meanings prevailed and endured, how some of them failed, how new ones emerged and how these meanings elucidate some of the events during the Obama years.<sup>3</sup>

The specific process of analysis in each case and in each case study is similar: it involves iterative readings, during the course of which I discern regularly occurring patterns. I record these patterns and list them, connect them to other patterns and to elements of cultural tradition such as American exceptionalism, as well as established intellectual traditions such as teleological thinking. I do not, however, identify the traditions or cultural tropes that will be relevant, prior to the analysis. The categories of analysis are emergent

rather than preexisting. I only aim to connect the discursive patterns to one another as they emerge and to existing phenomena after they have emerged. Connections to and comparisons with other patterns is a way to identify new meanings emerging and existing meanings changing. This is my practice of "noting the language game" (PI para 655) and my account of what I found. It bears pointing out that a good review of early-twenty-first-century debates about analyzing discourse (Wodak 2006a) prominently features Wittgenstein's concept of the language game. This is methodological terrain where language game awareness is *sine qua non*.

The outcome or product of this process of noting the language game is the series of case studies in the following chapters. The nature of the account is possibly similar to that of a field journal as I recount what I found, what I believe my findings mean and how they are connected. These connections are all the more significant as the case studies are not all carried out on what is commonly referred to as the same levels of analysis.

Patterns of discourse are able to connect and contextualize one another across levels of analysis. The ontology of discourse is such that its patterns are identifiable on a variety of levels and at multiple sites. The sequence of six case studies here may be understood as moving slowly upwards in levels of analysis. From the detailed, phrase-level analysis of presidential speeches I move to include news coverage of speeches by Obama, to news coverage of the report by the House Special Committee on Benghazi, to news discourse breaking away from presidential discourse and then, finally, discourse responding to videos produced by terrorists. I maintain that this is a legitimate approach because I am not seeking to describe fixed entities that patiently and passively preexist analysis but rather to diagnose discourse by biopsying it. Fixed entities preexisting analysis can only be assumed within referential theories of meaning and I reject those. I am closer to the position of Doty (1993) who moves away from referential theories of meaning by elaborating the discursive practices approach that "does not presuppose that particular subjects are already in place. It thus does not look to individual or collective subjects as the loci of meaning. Regarding language practices themselves as relatively autonomous admits the question of a kind of power that constitutes subjects, modes of subjectivity and 'reality'" (Doty 1993: 302).

A final disclaimer is in order before launching into the case studies: the predicament of discourse creating the possibility and then the plausibility for foreign policy action is not unique to the United States. Every administration in every country functions in a discursive field and relies on discourse as a launch pad for policies and nationwide understandings of what policy objectives stand for. President Obama's time in office is of historic significance, though, and therefore deserves to be examined in a manner conducive to insights and narratives just as much as it deserves to be examined through other analytical perspectives.

## NOTES

1. I specifically take my inspiration from *Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty*, referred to as PI and OC, respectively.
2. The classic formulation of thick description and research whose aim is a narrative and understanding rather than explanation, can be found in Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.
3. From a peculiarly 2017 perspective on the ability of discourse analysis to contextualize and elucidate foreign policy actions, I wish to point out that such analysis presupposes coherent and consistent discursive strategies. In the case of the United States, presidents, administrations, and mainstream media are the expected sources of these discursive strategies. In the case of President Trump's administration, up through the summer of 2017, no such coherent and consistent strategies can be identified and therefore discourse analysis of the current discourse would prove unusually challenging.