

# Security and Liberty in Post-9/11 US Counterterrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Presidential Rhetoric

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## Abstract

The article examines the rhetorical dimensions of US counterterrorism policy post-9/11 through a comparative analysis of four key speeches by Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. Using Van Gorp’s (2007) hermeneutic framing analysis, the study explores how each administration balanced (or did not) the demands of national security and civil liberties across different political and historical contexts. The findings show these US presidents employed framing devices like metaphors, examples, catchphrases, and depictions to construct a narrative of existential threat, fear, and urgency, securing public support for expansive government action. While Bush and Trump framed terrorism as an existential threat to justify aggressive measures, Obama and Biden adopted more moderate rhetoric, balancing security with civil liberties. The study identifies enduring patterns in the way framing devices are adapted across administrations and reveals how metaphors continue to be effective despite changing rhetorical strategies. These findings demonstrate the bidirectional role of framing devices: They can either drive securitisation, as evident in the rhetoric of Bush and Trump, or promote desecuritisation and a more balanced approach, as seen with Obama and Biden.

## Keywords

civil liberties; counterterrorism; political rhetoric; public opinion; security policy; terrorism narratives; United States

## 1. Introduction

The 11 September 2001 attacks were a decisive turning point in US national security, catalysing a debate on how democratic states balance counterterrorism imperatives with the preservation of democratic values,

including civil liberties. Protecting democracy entails safeguarding the principles and freedoms fundamental to democratic governance, even amid security threats. The rapid enactment of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act, which ramped up government surveillance powers, symbolised a much higher level of securitisation, raising critical questions about the long-term implications it held for democratic governance and individual freedoms. President George W. Bush framed terrorism as an existential threat, using rhetoric that invoked fear and urgency to justify far-reaching policy measures. This framing helped to reconfigure the relationship between security and democratic values, putting the trade-offs made between these priorities under sustained public and scholarly scrutiny.

The concept of “balance” is used in this article to refer to the tension between maintaining national security, viewed as an immediate necessity, and preserving the democratic principles and civil liberties essential for public trust and government legitimacy. By analysing the ways in which US presidents addressed this relationship, the study situates their rhetoric within broader debates about the trade-offs inherent to counterterrorism policy. This balance is critical in defence policy because it stresses the dual responsibilities held by democratic leaders: to protect citizens from threats while preserving the freedoms that define democracy. The ways in which leaders articulate and operationalise this balance offer important insights into the ethical limits of state power, the framing of public discourse, and the evolution of defence strategies in response to global threats.

By analysing rhetorical framing devices, the article investigates how US presidents shaped public understanding of terrorism, legitimised their policy choices, and constructed narratives that sought to reconcile security imperatives with democratic ideals. We argue that rhetorical framing devices—such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, and depictions—play a central role in the construction and evolution of counterterrorism strategies, operating in two ways: either prioritising security and reinforcing securitisation or promoting desecuritisation and fostering a more balanced approach to counterterrorism.

Scholars have extensively considered the strategic use of framing devices to align public priorities with political goals (Dan et al., 2019; Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007) and to legitimise security measures while addressing liberties (Brugman et al., 2019). Research has also looked at how media framing and government discourse interact to shape public opinion of counterterrorism policies (Lewis & Reese, 2009; Matthes & Kohring, 2008), with attention paid to how metaphors and framing devices influence public understanding of terrorism (Murphy, 2003; Winkler, 2008). Moreover, studies examining the framing of Muslim Americans before and after 9/11 revealed the significant role of cultural and political narratives in determining the broader discourse on terrorism (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2004; Norris et al., 2004). The emotional and populist aspects of political leadership have been similarly explored, especially in analyses of Trump’s rhetorical strategies (Skonieczny, 2018).

Notwithstanding these contributions, the evolution of framing strategies across multiple presidencies remains underexplored. Existing studies like those by Rubin (2020) and Gonzalez-Ramos (2023) tend to concentrate on individual administrations without tracing the longitudinal shifts in presidential rhetoric. While prior literature has extensively analysed the thematic and political dimensions of counterterrorism (Boydston & Glazier, 2013; Hall, 2022; Hotchkiss, 2010; Jasperson & El-Kikhia, 2004; Jenkins, 2017a; Rubin, 2020), this article seeks to address this gap by contextualising framing strategies within the trajectories of four different administrations

and examining how these narratives resonate with public opinion through data from the Pew Research Center and Rasmussen Reports.

This article is structured as follows: First, it outlines the theoretical foundations of counterterrorism rhetoric, emphasising the constructivist framework and the role of framing devices in shaping security narratives. The methodological approach used to analyse the selected speeches is then explained. The main analysis focuses on the evolution of rhetorical framing across the four administrations, highlighting the interrelationship of presidential rhetoric, public opinion, and policy outcomes. Finally, the findings are synthesised to offer a comparative perspective on the role of presidential rhetoric in influencing US counterterrorism policy and the broader implications this holds for democratic governance.

## 2. Counterterrorism Narratives in US Presidential Rhetoric

The interplay between security and liberty as foundational elements of counterterrorism has grown in prominence in security studies and international relations, especially following the 11 September 2001 attacks. Scholars have critically examined the ethical implications of post-9/11 terrorism discourse and government actions, focusing on the justifications and strategies underpinning the war on terror (Fahmy, 2010; Flint & Falah, 2006). Historically, the tension between safeguarding national security and preserving civil liberties has been a recurring challenge for policymakers, notably in times of crisis (Bobbitt, 2009). This ongoing struggle is particularly salient in democratic societies where public opinion and policymaking must address the competing priorities of security and individual freedoms (see Cameron, 2003; Cheney, 2004; Cushman, 2005; Hayden, 2017).

Counterterrorism strategies inherently require a thoughtful balance between protecting national security and upholding the ideals that define democratic societies. Legal scholar David Cole warned that counterterrorism measures that infringe on civil liberties risk eroding public trust and undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Cole, 2004). Similarly, Bruce Ackerman pointed out the dangers of unchecked executive power, arguing that expansive counterterrorism authorities could evade constitutional checks and balances, thereby threatening democracy itself (Ackerman, 2013). Didier Bigo, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and Jef Huysmans further warned of the perils of security narratives that prioritise state security at the expense of individual freedoms. These narratives, they argued, can reshape public discourse, relegating civil liberties to the margins and normalising measures that compromise fundamental rights (Bigo & Guittet, 2011; Huysmans, 2004).

Constructivism provides a theoretical lens for understanding how key political leaders, such as US presidents, construct narratives of security and liberty. As Wendt (1992) argued, “anarchy is what states make of it,” meaning that security threats are constructed through ideas, identities, and norms rather than existing innately. In this framework, the term “narratives” refers to coherent stories constructed by political actors to give meaning to security challenges, consistent with the constructivist principle that concepts like security and liberty are socially constructed. Built through framing devices, these narratives shape public understanding of threats and legitimise specific policy actions.

Framing devices are one type of rhetorical device. They explicitly organise and highlight certain elements of a narrative to direct public opinion in line with political objectives (Van Gorp, 2007). For example, framing

terrorism as a moral struggle or an existential threat simplifies complex geopolitical issues, creating urgency and fostering public support for certain policy measures. This process reflects constructivist principles, showing how concepts such as security and liberty are actively constructed within a socio-political context (Onuf, 2012). By contrast, rhetorical devices are a broader category that can include stylistic flourishes, emotional appeals, or linguistic patterns that may not necessarily involve the explicit organisation of narrative elements.

Constructivist scholars like Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explored how evolving international norms constrain state behaviour and influence security policies. Buzan et al. (1998) cautioned that securitisation can over-prioritise state security at the expense of societal values. Hoffman (1998) demonstrated how framing terrorism as an existential threat can perpetuate cycles of overreaction, eroding public trust and long-term stability. More recently, Balzacq (2011) and Hansen (2012) expanded on the dynamics of securitisation, exploring how discourse impacts both policy and public opinion. Acharya (2014) pointed to the risks of overly securitised policies failing to resonate globally or domestically, particularly when they neglect local contexts.

Democratic governments face unique pressures to balance security and liberty. As Ganor (2005) argued, democratic states have a moral obligation to protect their citizens from terrorism, even if this requires navigating difficult trade-offs with civil liberties. Prezelj (2002) looked at the inherent vulnerabilities of democratic societies where freedoms can be exploited by terrorists to challenge state responses (Crelinsten & Schmid, 1992). Constructivism helps explain how these vulnerabilities are rooted in socially constructed values like openness and liberty, which influence how governments interpret and respond to threats. Onuf (2012) argued that concepts such as sovereignty, security, and liberty are moulded by political actors and institutions. These socially constructed norms strongly influence how democratic leaders respond to the tension between counterterrorism measures and the preservation of individual freedoms.

Terrorism's dual-threat nature—concerning both physical security and democratic governance—illustrates the complexity of counterterrorism in democratic societies. While democratic freedoms can inadvertently provide avenues for terrorist strategies, they also serve as a foundation for peaceful political change. Post-9/11 counterterrorism measures have introduced significant debates in democracies about the potential erosion of civil liberties, prompting scrutiny of presidential rhetoric and policies. Recognising the intricate security-liberty relationship, the next section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study to analyse US presidential counterterrorism rhetoric.

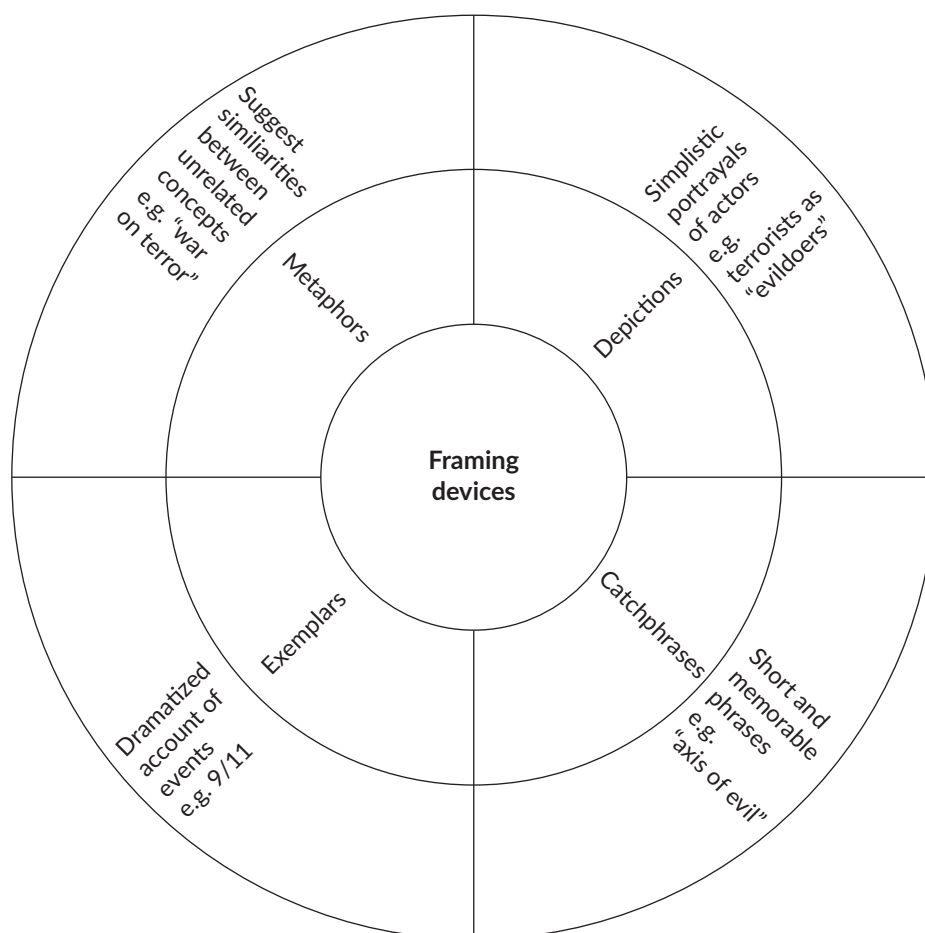
### 3. Methodological Approach to Analysing Presidential Counterterrorism Rhetoric

The study of framing in counterterrorism rhetoric has developed considerably, grounded in foundational theories of narrative construction and meaning-making. Early works by Yanow (2000) and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) defined framing as the selective emphasis, contextualisation, and organisation of events to create coherent narratives. Scholars have since recognised that frames guide public understanding by linking subjects (e.g., the US) to problems (e.g., terrorism) and proposing solutions (e.g., military action) via a narrative structure of disturbance and resolution (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

Frames function as implicit understandings that shape public opinion (Bateson, 2000; Yanow, 2000). They simplify complex issues, assign responsibility, and guide interpretation by way of explicit and implicit

cues (Entman, 1993; Rein & Schön, 1977). Framing devices like metaphors, catchphrases, and depictions often resonate with cultural memory and shared values, amplifying their impact (see Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Van Gorp, 2007). These insights form the foundation of this study's methodological approach.

Building on this foundation, this study employs framing analysis—reinterpreted as a narrative-building tool—to examine how US presidents construct counterterrorism strategies. Following Van Gorp's (2007) hermeneutic framing analysis, the article distinguishes framing devices—i.e., explicit tools like metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, and depictions—from reasoning devices, which are implicit tools that define problems, assign blame, and propose solutions. The study focuses exclusively on framing devices (see Figure 1), which organise and emphasise elements of a narrative to align public opinion with political objectives.



**Figure 1.** Typical framing devices and their application in the field of counterterrorism (adapted from Van Gorp, 2007).

Framing devices serve as specialised rhetorical tools that shape how security challenges are understood. While all framing devices are rhetorical in nature, not all rhetorical devices function as framing tools. For clarity, framing devices include:

1. Metaphors, which suggest similarities between unrelated concepts (e.g., the “war on terror”).

2. Catchphrases, which condense complex ideas into short, memorable phrases (e.g., “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”).
3. Exemplars, which dramatise certain events to symbolise broader phenomena (e.g., 9/11 as a defining moment).
4. Depictions, which offer simplified portrayals of actors or situations (e.g., framing terrorism as an existential threat to “freedom itself”).

These distinctions clarify the coding and categorisation process described in Section 4. In addition, the study acknowledges that not all framing devices can be found in every presidential speech. This variability reflects intentional rhetorical choices as presidents tailor their rhetoric to match the political, historical, and strategic priorities of their administrations.

The analysis centres on pivotal speeches given at key transitional moments in US counterterrorism policy. Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), the following speeches were selected based on their historical, rhetorical, and thematic significance:

1. George W. Bush’s address to Congress (20 September 2001): Establishing the “war on terror” in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.
2. Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (10 December 2009): Addressing the balance between ethical imperatives and national security.
3. Donald Trump’s address at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit (21 May 2017): Highlighting strategic alliances and binary depictions of terrorism.
4. Joe Biden’s address announcing the withdrawal from Afghanistan (16 August 2021): Marking a shift toward recalibrated counterterrorism priorities.

These speeches were selected for their role in framing critical policy decisions and influencing public opinion. Delivered at moments of elevated public attention, they offer insights into how framing devices shape narratives that resonate with domestic and international audiences. Each speech was divided into thematic sections, then scrutinised for metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, and depictions. Identified devices were subsequently contextualised within the speech to confirm alignment with framing theory.

To assess the potential impact of framing devices, the study incorporated public opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and Rasmussen Reports. This mixed-methods approach bridges the gap between rhetorical intent and audience reception, offering a deeper understanding of the relationship between political narratives and public opinion. By combining qualitative framing analysis with quantitative public opinion data, the study demonstrates how framing devices function as a bridge between presidential rhetoric and policy outcomes.

Although the study focuses on a limited number of speeches, its findings reveal broader patterns in presidential rhetoric. By providing a detailed explanation of the coding and categorisation process, along with public opinion data, this study establishes a clear link between rhetorical framing and audience reception. It contributes to the fields of framing analysis, political communication, and securitisation by illustrating how US presidents use framing devices to shape public understanding of counterterrorism strategies and align policy with evolving security challenges.

## 4. Presidential Rhetoric and US Counterterrorism Policy

Following the 11 September 2001 attacks, US presidents adopted rhetorical strategies to shape counterterrorism policy and influence public opinion. By comparing speeches delivered by Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, this section traces the use of specific framing devices, their alignment with broader strategies, and how these influenced policy choices and public opinion.

### 4.1. *President George W. Bush: Framing Terrorism as an Existential Threat*

President George W. Bush's speech to Congress on 20 September 2001 is a defining moment in the US's response to terrorism. Delivered right after the attacks, it demanded urgent action and sought to unify the nation. This section explores how the framing devices he used resonated with the public, translated into policy, and influenced public opinion over time.

#### 4.1.1. The Speech: Framing Devices Analysis

Bush's rhetoric relied on powerful framing devices to construct terrorism as an imminent and universal threat. Central to this narrative was the metaphor of the "war on terror," which aligns with the definition of a metaphor as a framing device that draws comparisons between unrelated concepts. By likening the fight against terrorism to historical wars for freedom, this metaphor established an implicit connection between the abstract and diffuse nature of terrorism and the tangible and organised concept of warfare. Such framing emphasised urgency, military resolve, and a prolonged struggle, positioning counterterrorism as a moral and winnable campaign despite terrorism's defiance of conventional definitions of war.

Bush reinforced this narrative by invoking historical analogies, comparing Al-Qaeda to "fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism" (Bush, 2001). These comparisons drew on the moral clarity of past global conflicts, viewing the US as the natural defender of freedom and democracy. His assertion that terrorism would end in "history's unmarked grave of discarded lies" underscored the inevitability of victory and framed the conflict as a mission holding profound moral and historical significance (Bush, 2001).

The 9/11 attacks served as a central exemplar, symbolising terrorism's destructive power and elevating it to a moral imperative. Bush's vivid descriptions of the attacks personalised the threat, linking abstract ideals of liberty and democracy to the visceral trauma experienced by the nation. By portraying the attacks as an assault on "freedom itself" (Bush, 2001), Bush transformed counterterrorism from a policy agenda into a moral obligation founded on shared national values.

The catchphrase "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001) simplified the complexity of global terrorism into a binary moral framework. This narrative demanded global alignment, compelling nations to take sides and legitimising US-led interventions. By framing terrorism in stark moral terms, Bush's rhetoric resonated with audiences seeking clarity in a moment of crisis.

Finally, Bush used binary depictions to characterise the US as the "defender of freedom" and terrorists as the "heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century" (Bush, 2001). This moral dichotomy reduced the complexity of terrorism and its root causes, presenting it as an absolute moral failure rather than a



multidimensional geopolitical challenge. These framing devices worked in tandem to mobilise public and international support, framing counterterrorism as both a moral imperative and a global responsibility.

#### 4.1.2. From Rhetoric to Policy: The Bush Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism

Bush's rhetorical framing laid the foundations for the US's counterterrorism strategy, as outlined in the National Security Strategy (The White House, 2002). This document institutionalised the principles articulated in his speech, emphasising pre-emption, coalition-building, and the integration of domestic and international counterterrorism measures. The metaphorical framing of terrorism as an existential threat justified the adoption of pre-emptive military action, marking a shift from deterrence to proactive measures. The National Security Strategy explicitly stated that waiting for definitive evidence of an attack was no longer viable in an era of non-state actors and weapons of mass destruction (The White House, 2002).

Bush's catchphrase "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" became a cornerstone of US diplomacy, compelling nations to align with the US-led initiative. The invocation of Article 5 of NATO and the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan showed how rhetorical framing translated into actionable strategies that garnered international legitimacy and shared responsibility for military interventions.

Domestically, Bush's framing informed transformative policies such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (2002) and the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act. These initiatives operationalised the themes of resilience and proactive defence articulated in his speech. However, these measures also exemplified the erosion of civil liberties, since enhanced surveillance and intelligence-sharing capabilities raised concerns about overreach and the long-term implications for democratic values.

Although Bush's rhetoric successfully brought public sentiment in line with his strategic priorities, its binary framing limited flexibility in addressing the conflict's evolving nature. Such rigidity added to challenges in adapting to protracted wars and shifting geopolitical realities, ultimately affecting the administration's ability to sustain public trust.

#### 4.1.3. Public Opinion: Evaluating Bush's Counterterrorism Strategies

The effectiveness of Bush's rhetorical framing was evident in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. A Pew Research Center poll conducted shortly after the speech found that 86% of Americans supported the US's military action in Afghanistan, reflecting strong public agreement with Bush's framing of terrorism as both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity ("Post-September 11 attitudes," 2001). This high level of support reveals how his rhetoric galvanised national unity and legitimised military interventions.

Over time, however, the limitations of Bush's framing became apparent. While the metaphor of the "war on terror" initially unified public opinion, scepticism grew as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on. By 2006, only 40% of Americans believed the Iraq War had improved national security (Rosentiel, 2008). By 2008, a majority (54%) considered the war a mistake, reflecting declining confidence in the administration's counterterrorism strategy (Doherty & Kiley, 2023).



Bush's binary constructs, while effective for mobilising immediate support, proved less adaptable to the complexities of long-term conflict. The framing of terrorism as an existential threat left little room for nuanced policy shifts, causing public disillusionment and diminished trust in the administration's approach.

#### **4.2. President Barack Obama: Redefining Counterterrorism Through Moral and Strategic Framing**

President Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, delivered in Oslo, Norway on 10 December 2009, offered a reflective and nuanced approach to the US's counterterrorism efforts. Unlike his predecessor, Obama grappled with the moral complexities of leading a nation at war while accepting an award for peace. In his speech, he sought to redefine counterterrorism within the ethical and strategic frameworks of just war, multilateralism, and democratic values.

##### **4.2.1. The Speech: Rhetorical Framing Analysis**

Obama's rhetorical strategy centred on the concept of "just war," acknowledging that while war is tragic, it can be morally necessary to preserve peace and security. He stated, "We must begin by recognising the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations...will find the use of force not only necessary, but morally justified" (Obama, 2009). This metaphor framed military action as a reluctant but justifiable means to address existential threats when diplomacy fails, providing a moral foundation for counterterrorism policies.

To underscore this moral perspective, Obama invoked historical examples like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, noting their dedication to nonviolence while acknowledging its limitations in confronting certain conflicts. He explained, "A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms" (Obama, 2009). These references symbolised ethical leadership, allowing Obama to reconcile his commitment to peace with the pragmatic need for military force. By referencing these figures, Obama contextualised counterterrorism within a broader historical narrative of ethical responsibility.

The catchphrase "We are not mere prisoners of fate" stressed Obama's belief in human agency and the power of deliberate, principled action to shape a more just and peaceful world (Obama, 2009). This phrase encapsulated his administration's approach to counterterrorism, which balanced moral conviction with pragmatic considerations, calling for carefully measured interventions aligned with democratic ideals.

Obama also depicted the US as a nation committed to upholding international norms and human rights. He asserted that adhering to these principles "strengthens those who do, and isolates, and weakens, those who don't" (Obama, 2009). This depiction framed the US as a global leader striving to integrate counterterrorism efforts into a broader framework of ethical governance and international cooperation, reinforcing its role as a champion of democratic values.

Through these framing devices, Obama reframed counterterrorism as a strategy that harmonised moral imperatives with practical considerations. By emphasising multilateralism, moral responsibility, and adherence to international norms, he sought to position the US as a responsible actor committed to both global security and democratic principles.

#### 4.2.2. From Rhetoric to Policy: The Obama Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism

Obama's counterterrorism strategy affirmed ethical considerations, multilateralism, and community-focused interventions, which translated into concrete policies such as the 2010 National Security Strategy and the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative. These efforts marked a clear shift from prior administrations, reflecting Obama's rhetorical commitment to balancing security with democratic values and international cooperation.

The 2010 National Security Strategy broke from earlier doctrines by underscoring the importance of alliances, international institutions, and adherence to the rule of law in addressing security threats. Unlike the unilateralism of the Bush era, Obama's strategy called for "a broad coalition of nations" to confront shared global challenges. This approach stressed the integration of diplomacy, development, and defence, reinforcing the idea that counterterrorism efforts must operate within a framework of multilateral engagement and respect for human rights (The White House, 2010). The strategy's emphasis on collective action and international norms directly aligned with Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech, in which he advocated moral leadership and partnerships rooted in shared values.

The CVE initiative, officially outlined in the 2011 report *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, introduced a proactive, community-based approach to counterterrorism. Recognising the importance of local stakeholders, the CVE framework encouraged collaboration between federal agencies, grassroots organisations, and community leaders to address early signs of radicalisation (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2011). A key element of the CVE strategy was its focus on countering extremist propaganda; by challenging the narratives of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, the initiative aimed to undermine the ideological foundations of violent extremism. Efforts were also made to decouple extremist ideologies from the religions and communities they purported to represent, thereby reducing stigmatisation and strengthening social cohesion (Hoffman, 2009). The Department of Homeland Security's CVE grants, for instance, supported community-led projects designed to promote tolerance, build resilience, and combat divisive ideologies (Johnson, 2017).

Still, the CVE strategy faced criticism for disproportionately targeting Muslim communities, raising concerns about bias and alienation. Critics like the Brennan Center for Justice questioned the reliability of methodologies used to identify radicalisation and the lack of evidence supporting the initiative's effectiveness (Patel & Koushik, 2017). These critiques underscored the tension between ethical aspirations and practical implementation, revealing the challenges of balancing inclusivity with security.

#### 4.2.3. Public Opinion: Evaluating Obama's Counterterrorism Strategies

Obama's rhetorical framing, particularly his emphasis on ethical leadership and multilateralism, resonated with many Americans. A Pew Research Center poll in early 2010 showed that 51% of Americans approved of his handling of global security issues such as terrorism, reflecting widespread support for his principles of international cooperation and measured action (Pew Research Center, 2010). In addition, drone strikes—despite their controversial nature—received bipartisan support domestically, with approval ratings of 56% in 2013 and 58% in 2015 ("Continued support for U.S. drone strikes," 2013; "Public continues to back U.S. drone attacks," 2015).

Internationally, however, Obama's counterterrorism policies faced considerable criticism. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey across 20 countries revealed widespread disapproval of the US's drone strikes: 74% of Pakistani respondents cited excessive civilian casualties and only 5% expressed support ("Global opinion of Obama slips," 2012). This disconnect between domestic approval and international condemnation put the spotlight on the challenges of reconciling US security policies with global opinion.

The CVE initiative also elicited mixed reactions. Domestically, it was praised for its emphasis on community engagement but criticised for potentially stigmatising Muslim communities, as noted in a 2016 Brookings Institution report (McKenzie, 2016). Internationally, scepticism persisted, notably in regions where US foreign policy was seen as inconsistent with the ethical principles stated in Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech.

### ***4.3. President Donald Trump: Framing Terrorism as a Global Battle Between Good and Evil***

Delivered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, President Donald J. Trump's speech at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit on 21 May 2017 marked a defining moment in US counterterrorism rhetoric. Employing a combination of stark moral framing, calls for collective responsibility, and an emphasis on national sovereignty, Trump positioned the fight against terrorism as a universal moral imperative transcending national and religious boundaries.

#### **4.3.1. The Speech: Rhetorical Framing Analysis**

Trump's metaphor of a "battle between good and evil" framed terrorism as a fundamental moral struggle rather than a purely geopolitical issue (Trump, 2017). This binary framing cast the US and its allies as righteous forces combating "barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life" (Trump, 2017). By using dehumanising language, Trump heightened the perceived existential threat posed by terrorism, rallying both domestic and international audiences around the urgency of his counterterrorism agenda.

Noting the disproportionate impact of terrorism on Muslim-majority countries, Trump asserted that "some estimates hold that more than 95% of the victims of terrorism are themselves Muslim" (Trump, 2017). This statistic served to build solidarity among Muslim leaders, reframing terrorism as a shared threat that cuts across religious and cultural divides. By emphasising the global and indiscriminate nature of terrorism, Trump aimed to unify Middle Eastern leaders and their populations as part of a shared moral and strategic commitment to combat extremism.

A centrepiece of Trump's speech was his emphatic catchphrase "Drive them out," repeated with escalating urgency: "Drive. Them. Out. DRIVE THEM OUT of your places of worship. DRIVE THEM OUT of your communities. DRIVE THEM OUT of your holy land and DRIVE THEM OUT OF THIS EARTH" (Trump, 2017). This repetition functioned as both a rallying cry and a framing device, instilling a sense of immediacy and responsibility among regional leaders. By urging Middle Eastern nations to take a leading role in confronting terrorism, Trump shifted the burden of action onto local actors while reinforcing his administration's preference for burden-sharing in counterterrorism efforts.

Trump also depicted terrorists as individuals who "do not worship God, they worship death" (Trump, 2017), aligning with the definition of a depiction as a simplified portrayal of actors that emphasises certain characteristics to shape opinion. By highlighting the supposed worship of death, this depiction framed

terrorists as morally antithetical to civilisation, severing any association between terrorism and legitimate religious practice. Such rhetorical framing sought to delegitimise extremist ideologies while encouraging Muslim leaders to publicly dissociate their faith from acts of violence.

Notably, Trump avoided the term “radical Islamic terrorism,” a phrase he had frequently employed on the campaign trail. This rhetorical shift reflected an attempt to foster unity with Muslim-majority nations and avoid alienating key allies in the fight against extremism. By adopting a tone of moral clarity and shared responsibility, Trump framed the US as a partner in a global coalition against terrorism, emphasising collective action over unilateralism.

#### 4.3.2. From Rhetoric to Policy: The Trump Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism

Trump's rhetoric translated into a robust and often unilateral counterterrorism strategy marked by intensified military operations, stricter immigration policies, and a focus on burden-sharing with international allies (see Byman, 2018). The administration escalated military efforts against terrorist organisations, notably through increased drone strikes and special operations in places like Yemen and Somalia (in January and October 2017, respectively). In 2017, Trump authorised the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct covert drone strikes, reversing Obama-era restrictions that had limited such actions to the military (Shinkman, 2017; Welna, 2017). By the end of 2019, Trump's presidency had seen 2,243 drone strikes—surpassing the 1,878 conducted during Obama's two terms (“Trump revokes Obama rule,” 2019). These operations targeted high-profile figures, such as Qasim al-Raymi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in a 2020 drone strike (The White House, 2020).

In line with his national security priorities, Trump also implemented stringent immigration policies. Executive Order 13769, commonly known as the “travel ban,” restricted entry from several predominantly Muslim countries identified as security risks (The American Presidency Project, 2017). While controversial, the travel ban was framed as a necessary precaution to protect national security, resonating with Trump's “America First” doctrine.

Trump's National Counterterrorism Strategy, released in October 2018, emphasised burden-sharing and international partnerships. The strategy called on global allies to “equitably share the burden of confronting terrorism” and sought to strengthen the counterterrorism capabilities of partner nations (U.S. Department of State, 2018). This approach reinforced Trump's emphasis on collective responsibility, ensuring the US retained a leadership role while delegating operational responsibilities to regional allies.

#### 4.3.3. Public Opinion of the Trump Administration's Counterterrorism Policy

Public opinion on President Donald J. Trump's counterterrorism policy reflects deep partisan divides and offers insights into how his rhetoric at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit was received in the broader context of his presidency.

By January 2018, following his first year in office, 73% of Americans identified defending the country against terrorism as a top policy priority for Trump and Congress, making it one of the key issues alongside economic growth and education (Wike et al., 2018). However, partisan differences were stark: 89% of

Republicans prioritised terrorism compared to 64% of Democrats. These figures underscore how Trump's rhetorical framing of terrorism as a "battle between good and evil" resonated strongly with his Republican base but failed to bridge partisan divides.

Globally, Trump's counterterrorism rhetoric drew scepticism. A June 2017 Pew survey across 37 countries showed that only 22% of respondents trusted Trump's leadership on international affairs, a sharp decline from Obama's 64% average (Wike et al., 2017a). Confidence fell significantly among key US allies in Europe and Asia, revealing challenges in building international counterterrorism partnerships. Domestically, a December 2017 Pew survey reflected deep polarisation: Republicans largely supported Trump's "America First" policies, while Democrats strongly disapproved ("From #MAGA to #MeToo," 2017).

#### ***4.4. President Joe Biden: Framing the Afghanistan Withdrawal and the Realignment of US's Counterterrorism Strategy***

President Joe Biden approached US counterterrorism policy with a focus on concluding prolonged military engagements and recalibrating foreign policy priorities. His speech on 16 August 2021, announcing the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, marked a significant shift from prior administrations, reflecting a broader strategy to adapt to evolving global threats and prioritise strategic recalibration.

##### ***4.4.1. The Speech: Rhetorical Framing Analysis***

Speaking in the East Room of the White House, a venue reserved for historic and solemn announcements, President Biden declared the end of the US's longest war. In his speech, he framed the terrorist threat as having "metastasized well beyond Afghanistan" (Biden, 2021), using a compelling metaphor likening terrorism to a cancer spreading across multiple regions. This metaphor stressed the need for a globally adaptive counterterrorism strategy, one without geographical constraints and responsive to the diffuse nature of modern threats.

Biden emphasised the original objectives of the Afghanistan mission, including the disruption of al-Qaeda and the elimination of Osama bin Laden. By presenting these goals as now accomplished, he legitimised the decision to end US military involvement and redirected focus to contemporary and emerging security challenges. Biden also introduced the metaphor of "over-the-horizon operations" (Biden, 2021) to describe his administration's vision for modernised counterterrorism capabilities, signalling a strategic pivot toward leveraging advanced technology and partnerships without maintaining a permanent military footprint.

The catchphrase "our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building" (Biden, 2021) succinctly captured Biden's central message, reflecting a clear departure from earlier administrations' nation-building efforts. This phrase indicated a pragmatic shift toward prioritising core national security interests and avoiding prolonged military entanglements.

Biden also stressed the importance of Afghan sovereignty, stating: "We gave them every chance to determine their own future". He underscored that it is both the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country (Biden, 2021). This depiction framed the withdrawal as a step toward self-determination for Afghanistan, aligning the decision with broader principles of national independence and respect for sovereignty.

Through these framing devices, Biden positioned the withdrawal as a necessary response to shifting global security dynamics. His speech emphasised completed objectives, the principles of sovereignty, and the modernisation of counterterrorism efforts, aiming to secure public support for what he framed as a pragmatic and forward-looking policy decision.

#### 4.4.2. From Rhetoric to Policy: The Biden Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism

Biden's counterterrorism rhetoric translated into concrete policy initiatives underscoring his administration's strategic recalibration. The 2021 National Strategy for Combating Domestic Terrorism represented a ground-breaking effort, prioritising prevention and improved information sharing, and addressing the root causes of extremism (The White House, 2021). This strategy reflected Biden's commitment to aligning counterterrorism efforts with evolving global and domestic threats, reinforcing the principles outlined in his speech.

The administration also demonstrated its commitment to precision counterterrorism operations. In August 2022, a US drone strike in Kabul killed Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. In his statement following the operation, Biden asserted: "We are making it clear again tonight that no matter how long it takes, no matter where you are hiding, if you are a threat to our people, the United States will find you and take you out" (The White House, 2022). This operation epitomised the administration's "over-the-horizon" strategy, which prioritises targeted capabilities over large-scale military deployments (Shiel et al., 2021; Shively, 2024). While this approach reflected Biden's rhetorical focus on modernisation and adaptability, critics pointed out the challenges inherent in maintaining effective counterterrorism capabilities without a sustained on-the-ground presence.

#### 4.4.3. Public Opinion: The Evaluation of Biden's Afghanistan Withdrawal

The implementation of Biden's counterterrorism strategy, particularly the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, elicited mixed public reactions. While many Americans supported the decision to end the two-decade military engagement, considerable dissatisfaction arose over the withdrawal's execution, highlighting the complexities of aligning policy, rhetoric, and public expectations.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted from 23–29 August 2021 revealed that 54% of Americans believed withdrawing troops was the right decision, while 42% opposed it (Wike et al., 2021). However, opinions on the administration's handling of the withdrawal were less favourable: Only 26% rated its performance as excellent or good, with 42% rating it as poor (Van Green & Doherty, 2021). By September 2021, public opinion had further declined, with just 24% rating the performance positively and 48% negatively (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Partisan divides further complicated public opinion. While 70% of Democrats supported the withdrawal, 64% of Republicans were opposed to it. Similarly, 43% of Democrats rated the government's performance as excellent or good, compared to 77% of Republicans who judged it as poor (Pew Research Center, 2021). Internationally, sentiments mirrored the domestic scepticism. A Pew Research Center survey of 17 countries revealed that 52% supported the US decision to withdraw, but only 33% believed it was executed well (Wike et al., 2022). Moreover, nearly 69% of Americans expressed doubts about the US's long-term

success in Afghanistan, citing broader concerns regarding the withdrawal's implications (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Biden's approval ratings reflected these challenges. Between July and September 2021, his overall approval fell from 55% to 44%, with the withdrawal emerging as a significant factor (Wike et al., 2024). This shift in public opinion transcended party lines, with implications for both domestic and international confidence in Biden's foreign policy and leadership (Kiley & Doherty, 2024). The controversy surrounding the withdrawal's execution, coupled with global scepticism, underscored the difficulty of translating rhetorical framing into policy and sustaining public trust during a major foreign policy realignment.

#### ***4.5. Aligning Presidential Rhetoric With Public Opinion: A Comparative Perspective***

The evolution of US presidential rhetoric in counterterrorism reveals distinct shifts in framing strategies shaped by political and historical contexts. While President George W. Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric relied on crisis-driven framing, subsequent administrations adopted more nuanced approaches that reflected changing security priorities and public sentiment (see Table 1).

Bush's framing, characterised by the metaphor of the "war on terror" and binary depictions of "us vs. them," effectively mobilised public support for immediate military action. This rhetoric unified the nation in the wake of an unprecedented crisis, facilitating swift legislative and military responses. Over time, however, the rigid binary framing constrained strategic adaptability, contributing to declining public trust as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wore on and civil liberties came under scrutiny.

Obama's rhetoric marked a pivot toward ethical leadership and multilateralism. By invoking "just war" and referencing moral exemplars such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, Obama sought to balance the moral imperatives of counterterrorism with the practical necessities of global security. Nevertheless, his administration faced criticism for the ethical dilemmas posed by increased drone strikes and for the mixed reception of the CVE initiative.

Trump's rhetoric, centred on the metaphor "battle between good and evil" and linked to his "America First" doctrine, employed stark moral binaries to present terrorism as a global challenge requiring collective action. His emphatic repetition of "Drive them out" reinforced urgency and regional responsibility, resonating strongly with his domestic base but polarising global audiences. Trump's unilateral policies—such as expanded drone strikes and travel bans—further alienated key allies, resulting in a decline in global confidence in US leadership.

Biden's rhetoric, meanwhile, reframed US counterterrorism priorities by emphasising strategic recalibration and more modernised approaches (such as "over-the-horizon operations"). His focus on ending the US's longest war and scaling back military entanglements aligned with public desires to conclude protracted conflicts. However, criticism of the Afghanistan withdrawal's execution overshadowed these rhetorical efforts, highlighting the challenge of aligning public opinion with policy outcomes.



**Table 1.** Synthesis of presidential rhetoric and public opinion in the US.

President	Framing Devices	Primary Strategy	Public Opinion	Policy Outcomes
<b>George W. Bush</b>	Metaphor: "The war on terrorism" Depiction: Binary ("us vs. them") Catchphrase: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"	Pre-emptive military action; Coalition-building; Enhanced domestic security	Initial unity post-9/11; Declining support for the prolonged wars by 2006; Increased concern for civil liberties	USA PATRIOT Act, establishment of Department of Homeland Security; Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; Criticism for the erosion of civil liberties and executive overreach
<b>Barack Obama</b>	Metaphor: "Just war" Exemplars: Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi Catchphrase: "We are not mere prisoners of fate" Depiction: Ethical leadership	Multilateralism; Community engagement; Targeted operations	High domestic approval for drone strikes; Global criticism, especially of civilian casualties; Mixed public opinion on CVE initiatives	Increased drone strikes (with some oversight); CVE programmes; Ethical dilemmas in international security; International scepticism over US global leadership
<b>Donald Trump</b>	Metaphor: "Battle between good and evil" Catchphrase: "Drive them out" Depiction: Terrorists worship "death, not God"	Aggressive unilateralism; Immigration controls; Operational efficiency	Highly polarised domestically; Strong GOP support; Global criticism over travel bans and lack of transparency	Increased drone strikes; Travel bans; Focus on burden-sharing; Decline in global confidence in US leadership
<b>Joe Biden</b>	Metaphor: "Metastasized threats" Catchphrase: "Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building" Depiction: Afghan sovereignty and recalibrated priorities	Strategic recalibration; Multilateralism; Focus on domestic counterterrorism threats	Support for troop withdrawal; Criticism of how withdrawal was handled; Bipartisan concern with security gaps; International apprehension regarding reliability	Withdrawal from Afghanistan; National Strategy for Domestic Terrorism; Shift to over-the-horizon operations; Attempts at rebuilding alliances

#### 4.5.1. Rhetorical Simplicity and Binary Framing

A notable commonality in Bush's and Trump's approaches is the reliance on rhetorical simplicity. By reducing multifaceted geopolitical threats to clear-cut moral struggles, both administrations galvanised immediate support. As Olds (2015) explains, casting terrorism as a moral struggle between good and evil can unify

public support by appealing to national identity; however, it risks oversimplifying complex security issues. Bush's "war on terror" and Trump's "battle between good and evil" exemplify this approach. Berger and Luckmann (1966) note that such stark narratives, by resonating with societal fears, help legitimise sweeping policies (e.g., pre-emptive war, unilateral actions) but risk public disillusionment if conflicts become protracted or appear intractable.

#### 4.5.2. Survey Data on Resonance With Public Opinion

This article also examines how these narratives resonate with public opinion. Under Bush, framing the Iraq War as a key front in the "war on terror" initially garnered strong support (72% endorsement; Newport, 2003), though enthusiasm waned as the conflict dragged on. Obama's reliance on drone strikes received substantial domestic approval ("Continued support for U.S. drone strikes," 2013) but drew criticism abroad for civilian casualties (Drake, 2013a). Trump's unilateral counterterrorism measures polarised domestic opinion—winning strong backing from certain demographics ("Most support temporary ban," 2017) yet drawing global criticism (Jenkins, 2017b; Patel & Koushik, 2017). Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan elicited similarly mixed reactions, highlighting the complex interplay between presidential rhetoric, policy decisions, and public sentiment (Pew Research Center, 2021; Van Green & Doherty, 2021).

Overall, these data illustrate that while strong, simple narratives can boost initial public support, they may also deepen polarisation and prove unsustainable as policy realities evolve. More nuanced or ethically oriented rhetoric can foster broader legitimacy yet may invite criticism for a perceived lack of decisiveness—particularly during international crises or heightened domestic political pressures.

## 5. Conclusion

The presented comparative analysis of US presidential rhetoric shows how framing devices like metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, and depictions have considerably influenced counterterrorism narratives, shaping public trust and policy legitimacy. By examining the speeches of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, this article focuses on the relationship between rhetorical framing strategies, public opinion, and policy outcomes in distinct political and historical contexts.

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the bidirectional nature of framing devices: They can drive securitisation, like with Bush and Trump's rhetoric, or promote desecuritisation and balance, as seen with Obama and Biden. The findings illustrate that framing devices are not merely rhetorical tools but essential mechanisms via which presidents construct and legitimise their counterterrorism strategies.

Presidents Bush and Trump employed emotionally charged and binary frames that prioritised security over civil liberties, often invoking fear and urgency to justify expansive measures such as pre-emptive military action, enhanced surveillance, and immigration restrictions. Conversely, Presidents Obama and Biden adopted more nuanced rhetorical approaches, emphasising ethical considerations, multilateralism, and the recalibration of counterterrorism priorities. These distinctions illustrate how different framing strategies influence the opinion and effectiveness of counterterrorism policies within changing socio-political contexts.

The study also stresses the importance of aligning rhetorical framing with public opinion and democratic values. For instance, Bush's framing of the "war on terror" initially unified the nation under a moral imperative but eroded over time as conflicts persisted and civil liberties came under scrutiny. Likewise, Biden's framing of the Afghanistan withdrawal as a strategic recalibration resonated with public calls to end prolonged military engagements yet encountered widespread criticism for its execution, revealing the difficulty of bridging rhetoric and operational realities.

Grounded in a constructivist framework, this analysis highlights how political leaders construct and adapt security narratives to manage the tension between security and democratic values. It points to the pivotal role of rhetorical framing in sustaining public trust, fostering policy legitimacy, and ensuring ethical governance in response to complex global security challenges.

Despite its contributions, this study faces limitations. Its focus on a small set of key speeches limits the scope of analysis, and the interplay among presidential rhetoric, media representation, and audience reception deserves more systematic exploration. Future research could expand the corpus of presidential speeches, examine how media coverage mediates the link between rhetoric and public opinion, and investigate reasoning devices—i.e., implicit framing tools. Additionally, research on audience reception across different demographic groups could reveal how counterterrorism narratives resonate within diverse segments of the population.

In conclusion, presidential rhetoric stands as a critical tool for shaping public opinion and legitimising counterterrorism policy. By understanding how framing devices operate in specific political and historical contexts, policymakers and scholars can better appreciate the challenges of crafting ethical and effective counterterrorism strategies that uphold democratic principles and maintain public trust. This study's findings underscore the need for rhetorical flexibility, ethical leadership, and meaningful public engagement to address the ever-evolving demands of global security.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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