

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The Politics of Representation and the Social Order: In the War on Terror

by

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This thesis empirically examines how a political administration in power legitimates important and controversial policies in public political discourse over a period of time. Based on an in-depth study of the “politics of representation” processes surrounding the early U.S. War on Terrorism between 2001 and 2004, utilizing more than 1,500 public speeches and documents as data, it shows how the George W. Bush Administration developed and applied a cultural script—the War on Terror script—to create and sustain a socially intelligible “reality” (collective representation) with implications for world politics through its incremental interactions with other political players in public discourse. The constitution and maintenance of this “reality” depended on complex and artful epistemic and discourse

practices, including using selective facts, deploying linguistic devices, connecting to deep-seated cultural conceptions, analyzing cost and benefit, mobilizing investigative resources, and enacting coercive political actions. These elaborate representational practices assembled otherwise unconnected events and ideas into intelligible, coherent, meaningful order in different epistemic forms, consequently legitimating many important political decisions that have grave societal and historical effects while suppressing oppositional voices and challenging contradictory evidence.

In contrast to existing analyses and criticisms of the Bush Administration's legitimation effort that focus on practices of misinformation, cultural appeal, or arbitrary rhetorical exercises, this research shows the artful uses of a discourse legitimation tool—the script of the War on Terrorism—that flexibly incorporates and integrates facts and events presented on the political stage over time and sustains many policy arguments pertaining to the War on Terrorism. Showing the richness and versatility of the War on Terror knowledge system, this analysis speaks to the larger issue of the practical formation of political ideology for war by calling attention to the powerful—but often invisible—uses of deep cultural premises in political reasoning and the incredibly elaborate discursive and evidential mechanisms sustaining those premises. It makes a case for sociological researchers to move beyond interrogating thematic and contextual meanings espoused by public political actors into dissecting situated discursive and epistemic practices upholding those meanings.