

Book Review: Obama, the Media and Framing the U.S. Exit from Iraq and Afghanistan by Erika G. King

Obama, the Media, and Framing the U.S. Exit from Iraq and Afghanistan examines two case studies of presidential and media framing: the weeks surrounding the formal announcements of Obama's December 2009 "surge-then-exit" strategy from Afghanistan; and the end of combat operations in Iraq in August 2010. **Patrick Weir** finds that **Erika G. King's** compelling conclusions make this book is attractive to students interested in media framing, war studies, and foreign politics.



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American foreign policy has come to be defined through its numerous military engagements overseas, although perhaps it is more true to say defined through how these engagements *end*, rather than begin. Comprehensive victories and ignominious exits contribute equally to the popular perception of the role of America's military in the world, although the latter undoubtedly provide more. In this extended study, Erika G. King assesses the narratives competing for recognition offered by official (i.e. state) and unofficial (i.e. mass media) discourses during the protracted US military "drawdown" from Iraq and Afghanistan during the Obama presidency.



Chapter 1 chronicles the origins of the situation inherited by Obama by addressing the discursive construction of the US "surge" in Iraq in 2007. King points to the fact that the policy of the "surge" in early 2007 was necessitated after it became clear that the U.S. had lost control of significant regions of Iraq and that the failure of the occupation to provide stability and consent had led to a bloody sectarian conflict. However, as she also argues, the White House sought to present the surge as part of the ongoing war against terrorism and, in particular, came to rely on the perceived credibility and gravitas of General David Petraeus in the establishing of this preferred narrative. The problem for oppositional discourses, both within the legislative branch and the mainstream media, she argues, can be put down to the unwillingness of these actors to mount a serious attack on the credibility of this narrative and the Iraq war more generally whilst military operations were ongoing. Gen. Petraeus had become the public face of the surge and consequently the Bush administration was thus able to use Petraeus and the surge as a first line of defence against the establishment of counter-narratives to Iraq/War on Terror conflation. King finds that media representations, particularly in, for example, the New York Times, prior to Petraeus' testimony to congress which provided the ideal opportunity for opponents of the war to go on the attack, ultimately never materialised as they did not "seem inclined to dispute with much vigour the assessments provided by a commander with medals on his chest and four stars on his shoulder" (p.35). Credibility, in times of war, often rests as much on the perception of commanders in the field as it does "facts on the ground".



By the time of his inauguration, President Obama's views on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had become a matter of public record. King's analysis of Obama's senate and campaign speeches reveals that even before 2008 he regarded the war in Iraq as "The greatest strategic blunder in the recent history of American foreign policy" (p.116). Contrastingly, his public comments were pronounced in articulating the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as essential not only to American security at home but to America's role in shaping the

direction of the global order at large. Here though, King deploys a central point of her argument: namely, that there is greater continuity than difference in the war narratives of both administrations, and that both relied on a stock system of representations and appeal to a unique and transcendental American role in the world. As King puts it, by 2008, “The missionary and exemplary strands of exceptionalist thought had become inextricably intertwined in Obama’s national security rhetoric...Obama’s rhetorical construction of America at war reflected far more continuity than change from his predecessor’s frame of a global war on terrorism” (p.51).



President Barack Obama speaks to a crowd of Marines, sailors and family members aboard Camp Pendleton, Aug. 7, 2013. Credit: [DVIDSHUB](#) CC BY 2.0

In her third chapter, King addresses “Obama’s surge” in Afghanistan as part of the shift of strategic focus to “Af/Pak”, through an analysis of the (sceptical) media lens. She finds four major themes running through the news reports and commentaries of this period: corruption and chaos in the Af/Pak region; presidential deliberation on the way forward in the war; terrorism on U.S. soil; and the strategic calculus behind the “surge then exit” policy in Afghanistan. The combination of these factors on top of the media’s acceptance of the broader Bush-Obama terror frame (particularly in relation to American exceptionalism) established prior to the Afghan surge meant that the longer these negative themes dominated public discourse the more difficult it became for Obama to have his narrative of a successful campaign and draw-down accepted by the media. As King suggests, “If the divide between official rhetoric and reality increases with the passage of time, media reportage trends ever more negative despite all the promotional efforts of the commander-in-chief to paint a relatively glowing portrait of the possibilities for Afghanistan’s future and American security” (p.112). Consequently, she concludes, “Anyone seeking strong evidence of presidential ability to turn media sentiment to his side would be hard pressed to find it in the case of Afghanistan and the president’s decision to surge then exit from the conflict there” (p.113)

Chapter 4 returns to the question of Iraq and how Obama sought to manage the representation of his attempts to bring about a conclusion to “America’s war of choice”. Central to this became the shift from ideal to achievable objectives and metrics of success, a turn to “Concrete objectives...preventing Iraq from becoming what Afghanistan once was, maintaining our influence in the Middle East, and forging a political settlement to stop the sectarian violence so our troops can come home” (p.117). From the mistake of Iraq, King finds in Obama’s language an attempt to resurrect, through the exit strategy “An exceptionalist mission to the goals of U.S. foreign policy by defining an idealist and optimistic future that framed a uniquely American moral purpose in the world” (p.144).

The compelling conclusion, King argues, is that Obama’s war on terror narrative, begun prior to his presidency, of “victory” was always a qualified one; re-cast, non-totalising and achieved through a focus on realistic objectives of “degrading” and “dismantling” and “disrupting” the enemy, rather than their decisive defeat. Consequently, the

draw-downs in Iraq and Afghanistan led to an odd kind of stalemate in representations, with the administration lacking in sufficient ground-level markers of success to gain media acquiescence to its preferred narrative of victory but with sufficient credibility to deflect attempts to establish a counter-narrative of failure and retreat. For King, this is indicative of wider trends in media representations of late-modern warfare which, by its very nature, often proves inimical to the provision of “cut and dry” images, or strategic victories. The consequence of this, more worryingly, “as Obama attempted to achieve closure with a unifying and uplifting narrative of success, the media refused to follow his framing lead, first constructing a far less positive tales of war’s end and then virtually banishing the subject from their reportage” (p.188).

Patrick Weir is a PhD student in Cultural Geography at the University of Exeter, where he arrived after completing an undergraduate degree in Philosophy at Glasgow University and an MLitt in International Relations at St Andrews. Patrick’s PhD research surrounds cultural geographies of foreign news, with a focus on re-examining the media representations of distant suffering in light of non-representational theories. [Read more reviews by Patrick.](#)

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