Critical Dialogue

Narrative and the Making of US National Security. By Ronald R. Krebs. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 387p. $99.69 cloth. $32.90 paper.
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— Laurie A. Brand, *University of Southern California*

There was a time when discussions of narratives were largely limited to the academy and its disciplines of literature and critical studies. No more. From analyses of local politics to those of presidential campaigns and debates, the existence of, or need to control, a particular narrative has become standard content in journalistic writings and pundits' analyses. However, this implicit acknowledgment that stories shape our understandings, that single events may produce multiple versions, and that winning the battle of structuring their meanings is critical to other, more concrete, victories does not mean that the term "narrative" is now used with greater precision or care.

All the more important, then, that political scientists devote more systematic attention to the topic. The work under review here is an impressive attempt to bring theory and order to the study of narratives in international relations through an examination of their role in shaping national security policy. Ronald Krebs's argument, buttressed by carefully constructed case studies from episodes in U.S. history, is that the predominant paradigms in IR are not capable of explaining the rise (or fall) of national security narratives. For example, as he illustrates, in contrast to what realists would argue, the international system does not offer clear imperatives regarding the content of narratives, but instead requires that a leadership engage in a politics of meaning construction. Further, contrary to what liberal internationalists would contend, policy is the product not just of bargaining among societal groups seeking to further their interests, but also of the role of leaders in the contestation over meaning settings in which the range of possible constructions is significantly limited by collective understandings.

The author's argument rests on three premises: that on the largest questions of national security, leaders must legitimate their chosen policies before the public; that not all conceivable policies can be legitimated, and if a policy cannot be legitimated, it cannot be pursued over the long term; and that events, even high-profile international ones, do not speak for themselves, and hence, much of the politics of national security revolves around a competition over constructing or interpreting their meaning. For these reasons, Krebs argues, students of security affairs should devote attention not just to the existence of security narratives, which few would deny, but also to how the debates are structured. The content of the narrative should not be seen as self-evident, a direct reflection of the interests of the powerful, but as a powerful force in and of itself.

This study is divided into two parts. Part I explores *how* particular national security narratives have become dominant, while Part II examines the question of *when* security narratives rise and fall.

In Part I, Krebs posits that there are two intuitively appealing answers to the question of how such narratives attain dominance: a leader's individual charisma or power, or the unmediated meaning of an international event. Finding them both unsatisfying, he proceeds to construct a more convincing explanation based on the interaction of three elements: the rhetorical demands of the *environment*, the power of the *speaker(s)*, and the rhetorical *mode* adopted. The environment may be what he terms settled or unsettled: situations in which a preexisting dominant narrative shapes elites' attempts to legitimate their policies versus situations in which there is no hegemonic story line. Krebs then theorizes that a narrative attains dominance when setting and mode match: A settled environment is best addressed using the mode of argumentation, whereas an unsettled one requires the leader—in his cases, the U.S. president—to assume the role of "storyteller-in-chief" for the broader public. To test his theory, drawing on a range of historical works, as well as speeches and press accounts, he examines Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to Pearl Harbor and George W. Bush's narrative of 9/11.

In Part II, Krebs turns to the *timing* of narrative change, examining the examples of the Cold War and then the War on Terror, and relying largely on content analysis of opinion pieces from the conservative *Chicago Tribune* and the more liberal *New York Times*. Here, using the examples of the Korean War and the Cuban missile crisis, he makes the case for his most counterintuitive finding: that it is not periods of crisis, such as poor military performance or defeats, that open the way for a narrative change but, rather, episodes of victory or diplomatic success.

Like all solid scholarship in largely undertheorized and explored areas, Krebs's study raises at least as many questions as it seeks to answer. While suggesting that there are strong grounds for expecting that his argument should travel reasonably well, he himself notes several potential limitations or concerns: It is a single-country study; it focuses on a democracy, with all that that means for the institutionalization of security policy formulation and the possibilities for open discussion; and the national security narrative is only one strand of a broader national narrative whose other constituent parts cannot simply be assumed to operate according to the same "rules."

Several other elements of the author's argument and theorizing also invite further investigation. For example, while the settled versus unsettled environment framework appeals intuitively, Krebs himself uses a range of sources to make his determination of the nature of the environment in his cases, and, tellingly, his ex post assessments are quite different from the long-prevailing wisdom about them. Hence, it is not clear how policymakers could know ex ante in which environment the country finds itself in order to shape a narrative effectively. In addition, he admits that periods of narrative disorder are not all born equal, and that the strength of public demand for storytelling varies accordingly. Thus, perhaps these empirical realities argue for a conceptualization of the setting as a continuum from unsettled to settled, rather than as a dichotomy. Such an approach might also better explain the success of a mixture of rhetorical modes—which is what some of his case material demonstrates—rather than a choice between either argumentation or storytelling alone.

Another concern is Krebs's position that events do not have meaning in and of themselves, but also that there are limits to how events can be interpreted or narrated. Although he suggests plausible and implausible alternative story lines to the narrations chosen by the elite, he does not lay out what the range of acceptable narratives might be, or how we would determine it, except to suggest that the constituent elements cannot run counter to basic national identity components, which also, however, remain largely unspecified.

Thus, while the analysis helps us understand some of the mechanics of successful presentation of new meanings and their acceptance by the public, why a *particular* story line becomes hegemonic when it does is still limited by collective understandings. Krebs does not, for example, systematically engage the material interests of the punditocracy or the politico-economic elites they represent as an influence on the national security narrative. We are left to conclude that either the leader or elites successfully discerned which rhetorical mode the public craved, or that a set of circumstances (like battlefield problems) narrowed or shaped the bounds of discourse in a particular way because of political calculations, expediency, or opportunism.

Here, a specification of the broader national narrative or meta-narrative which, the analysis seems to suggest, is the source of enduring narrative components, could help explain the parameters of a successful subnarrative, like that in the national security realm. Of course, this then begs the question of the provenance of this meta-narrative. This is a far more difficult issue to address, but it may well be central to explaining narrative resilience or change.

Finally, while Krebs claims that this "book explores the silencing of dissent" (p. 20), he actually has very little to say about how narrative hegemony is enforced. In several instances, echoing the kind of hegemony that Antonio Gramsci grappled with, he attributes agency to the narrative through its apparent ability, by means of unspecified mechanisms, to straitjacket a leadership and marginalize voices whose positions fall beyond its parameters. However, while the less tangible forces that subtly normalize a range of shared understandings of history, politics, and identity may be more theoretically interesting, they should not blind us to the use of other, far less subtle, instruments of coercion that have been used by the American state to limit the bounds of "acceptable discourse."

Indeed, such narrative disciplining has at times involved vicious threats and harassment against those who refuse to acquiesce in the orthodoxy of the story lines and associated policy prescriptions propagated by the power elite. The mechanisms of the overt coercion often required for what is defined as narrative "success" need to be part of any analysis of narrative legitimation.

In sum, this study explicitly and implicitly suggests an extremely complex *interaction* among the political and economic elites, the media, the public, historical context, and meta-narratives in the emergence, rise and fall of national security narratives. One hopes that Krebs's theoretical insights, rich empirical case studies, and provocative conclusions will convince other IR scholars to reconsider their traditional approach to the study of narratives and further develop this critical area of research.

Response to Laurie A. Brand's review of *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*

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— Ronald R. Krebs

In her careful review of my book, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Laurie Brand raises a number of thoughtful and important questions. Before I try to answer, I want to highlight how much Brand and I have in common—despite our divergent regional expertise, analytical foci, and theoretical tastes. Not only do we

both believe that dominant narratives—whether national narratives, in her case, or narratives of national security, in mine—shape political processes and outcomes, but we both (I think) believe that they matter in more or less the same way: by making possible the legitimation of certain policies and rendering impossible the legitimation of others. We both see the articulation and rearticulation, or scripting and rescripting, of political narratives as resting on leadership, albeit confined at different times to varying degrees. We have even both reached some similar conclusions, despite the different political systems we explore—notably with respect to the narrative impact of military operations ending in (perceived) defeat and victory.

I suspect Brand would further agree that narratives are nested and that the fixing of meaning that inheres in narrative scripting requires, at the same time, the socially sustainable fitting of a lower-order, less capacious storyline into a relatively settled, higher-order, more capacious storyline. In our books, Brand and I attend to different levels in this nesting, and both of us pay less attention to the relationships between these levels. In short, we approach our subjects largely in parallel, and our analytical foci are complementary. There is a real opportunity here for productive dialogue—which we will just begin to explore within this forum and which I hope we will continue beyond its bounds.

I have opened with this preamble because what unites the participants in this dialogue is far greater than what separates us. This may not be apparent as we settle into the usual pattern of critique and response. But it is worth emphasizing.

Brand's review raises three points that I would like to address here: how we know whether narrative situations are settled or unsettled; how much analytical leverage we can gain by delving into the content of narratives; and what role a range of other, more material factors play in explaining a particular narrative's rise to dominance or its fall from that perch.

First, as Brand notes, much hinges in my account on the distinction between settled and unsettled narrative situations. In settled narrative situations, there is a dominant narrative, in whose terms elites generally legitimate their preferred policies. In unsettled narrative situations, debates are comparatively unstructured, as multiple legitimate narratives swirl about (pp. 32–36). In the book, I employ varied methods to ascertain the nature of the narrative situation—human and computerized content analysis, public opinion surveys (more the questions posed than the answers provided), contemporary observers' assessments, and audience response (pp. 60–61, 195–200). For decades, policymakers have tracked public opinion, if only to manipulate it. They could in principle employ my methods in real-time to track the opportunities for narrative scripting and rescripting. Contra Brand, there is nothing inherent in the method that renders the analysis purely ex post. Brand is right that narrative situations are properly placed along a continuum of more or less settled, rather than the dichotomy I adopt for analytical convenience. To this, I plead guilty—albeit in very good company.

Second, Brand asks what renders alternative narratives more or less sustainable *beyond* the conjuncture of narrative situation, speaker authority, and rhetorical mode on which I place my theoretical bets. I would expect Brand to be skeptical that there are substantive constraints on narration, since, as I wrote in my review, her conception of narrative seems to be thoroughly instrumentalized. I agree that we cannot construct generalizable theories identifying certain narratives as more or less plausible based on their content. My view runs contrary to that of political psychologists, who advance general accounts of resonant frames, and of narratologists, who offer guidelines to good storytelling (pp. 52–55). But this does not mean that where there is a (leader's) will, there is a rhetorical way—a view that I think Brand might endorse. Narrative constraints go beyond the deeper national identity narratives in which they are nested. Their constraints are rooted in the logic of path dependence. They lie at the intersection of past articulations, the expectations those articulations produce, and observed events. As in other path dependent accounts, we must identify those elements via induction before we can generate more specific claims. That is why, even though my theoretical discussion of these matters is brief, they feature prominently in the case studies.

Third, Brand proposes other factors and processes—elites' capacity and interests, straightforward coercion—to explain the dominance of particular narratives. I agree that successful narrative projects normally require the support of those who have large megaphones and are prepared to use them. I can hardly deny that some narrative projects become dominant because competing voices are squashed. Perhaps, in the repressive regimes Brand studies, that is typical: narrative opponents are thrown in jail or disappeared or intimidated into silence. But if there is no conceivable space for opposition, if brute force is the order of the day, if it is coercion all the way down, that is where we should put our analytical focus—not on the regime's narration and its quest for legitimacy. I don't think Brand herself believes this, or she would not have written her book. In many authoritarian regimes, not just democracies, there is space for opposition and thus meaningful, if constrained, contestation. Opponents often have substantial resources at their disposal and nevertheless either fail to gain traction or choose not to employ them. This is the universe of cases that I find puzzling and to which my theory speaks.

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We have just begun to write the story of narrative in comparative politics and international relations. I expect the conversation will continue beyond this Critical Dialogue.

Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria. By Laurie A. Brand. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 296p. $90.00 cloth, $27.95 paper.
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— Ronald R. Krebs, *University of Minnesota*

Political scientists are often skeptical of the power and importance of politicians' public pronouncements. "Mere" rhetoric, they sniff, contrasting these supposedly empty and meaningless words to the motives that truly drive behavior, the institutions that empower and constrain, and the material resources that actors desire, fear, and exploit. Public rhetoric counts for little, they insist. But politicians, Laurie Brand correctly observes at the start of *Official Stories*, know better. They recognize that no regime can survive by coercion alone. Regimes rest on legitimacy, and legitimacy rests on a resonant narrative. Politicians, even those operating in the authoritarian contexts she studies, carefully craft their legitimating message, broadcast it within the body politic, and seek to inculcate it in the next generation.

In her book, Brand explores in rewarding detail how leading politicians in Egypt and Algeria have scripted and continually rescripted the national narrative—to legitimate their regime in the face of ever-changing challenges, to undercut emerging competitors, and to make possible new political projects. These leaders have not acted as if public rhetoric were epiphenomenal or incidental, as if they relied on their substantial coercive capacity alone. They have, rather, treated the regime's public legitimation as a critical technology of rule, and thus they have devoted both attention and resources to it.

Legitimation, Brand unequivocally shows, is not unique to democratic politicians, who must cultivate a mass following to ensure their periodic reelection. It would seem from the author's rich research that authoritarian leaders, too, must cultivate legitimacy, among publics both broad and narrow. In fact, consistent with her findings, I would contend that authoritarian leaders invest even more in legitimation than their democratic counterparts because the procedural bases of democratic legitimation are relatively resilient and durable, compared to the more varied and malleable bases of authoritarian legitimation.

The great strength of *Official Stories* lies in its four central empirical chapters—two on Egypt, from the Free Officers Revolution through the stultified, corrupt regime of Hosni Mubarak, and two on Algeria, from decolonization through civil war. Brand engages in a close reading of national charters and major public addresses, with an eye to their sometimes subtle and sometimes stark narrative shifts. She also carefully examines school textbooks, as the primary means by which these regimes sought to indoctrinate youth and provide a stable basis for rule. Brand is particularly sensitive to discrepancies between the former, whose message the regime directly manages, and the latter, which requires a capacitous state that can both extract sufficient resources to revise educational materials and maintain tight control over the bureaucracy to ensure narrative consistency. The book concludes with a timely epilogue on the Arab Spring, in which the two countries' experiences diverged, and so too did the corresponding legitimation strategies: Algeria ironically enjoyed regime stability, whereas Egypt ran through three regimes in quick succession.

My knowledge of the politics of postindependence Arab states, let alone their official narratives, is limited. I participate in this dialogue not as a student of the Arab world but as a fellow traveler in the world of narrative. As a result, my focus in this review is less on the book's empirics, which strike me as impressive, than on its conceptual moves and theoretical claims, especially how to make sense of the numerous narrative shifts that Brand traces. Her conceptual and theoretical touch is admirably light, and she approaches the cases with no grand claims—beyond the insight that these regimes invoked and reworked foundational narratives to consolidate or retain power—and even no explicit working hypotheses.

Only toward the end, in a brief chapter entitled "Narrative Rescriptings and Legitimacy Crises," does she put the cases into dialogue with each other. Some of the findings are less surprising: Uncontested successions resulted in narrative continuity or minor narrative revisions, whereas contested successions sometimes (but not always) led to corresponding narrative revolutions (pp. 188–93). Some of these findings are more surprising: Wars ending in (perceived) defeat did not lead to large-scale narrative innovation, and wars ending in (perceived or effectively claimed) victory did not have consistent narrative effects (pp. 191–93). A fully specified theory of narrative change does not emerge from this comparative case analysis, and Brand is willing in conclusion only to point to "the composition and coherence of the leadership group or regime coalition" as a driving force: "[S]ignificant modifications [in the official narrative] are most likely to emerge in the context of a threat to a regime characterized by preexisting factionalism within its ranks, or when it faces significant opposition from below" (p. 195).

I must confess that after reading through so many pages of careful analysis, I was somewhat disappointed by the modesty of Brand's conclusions. This is, to some extent, a matter of taste and of different conceptions of social science. But the book, in my view, would have been stronger had she engaged more deeply with both conceptual foundations and theoretical implications. Since this review is part of what I expect will be a productive

dialogue, I will use it to pose a series of questions that I hope Brand will take up in reply.

First, what falls within or outside the official legitimating narrative? In her opening conceptual discussion, Brand rightly points to the identity markers of the national community (including who is inside and who outside the nation; pp. 10–16) and identifies "three central narrative themes"—"the founding story, the elements that have been promoted as constitutive of national identity, and the construction of the concept of national unity" (p. 24)—but these remain vague. What are the essential pillars of a particular legitimating narrative to which we should be attentive in the empirical chapters? Certain factors are appropriately featured—the place of Islam in both countries, Egyptian identity versus pan-Arabism, the acknowledgment of a Berber past in Algeria—but many other, seemingly minor, issues are treated as essential to regime legitimation in Brand's telling: for example, the role of foreign powers (p. 33), the commitment to political freedoms (p. 78), the goals of inter-Arab initiatives (p. 81), socialism (pp. 130–31), and many others. She may well be right that these various elements should be central to the analysis; my concern is conceptual and theoretical, not empirical. Without greater conceptual rigor, it is not clear what constitutes a substantial narrative reshaping, what is but a minor emendation, and what is a policy shift without narrative implications.

Second, are there any limits to narrative construction and reconstruction? Is it the case that where there is a will, there is always a rhetorical way? Brand understands state discourse as a "political tool" (p. 5). Hers seems to be a thoroughly instrumentalized conception of narrative. I did not see much evidence in the cases of consistency constraints, nor did I read of impossible narrative paths—though I imagine these existed. The author's perspective is retrospective, not prospective: She explores what was said—never what might have been said and was not, or what could not have legitimately been said. I found myself wondering about the range of conceivable legitimations and whether there were any limits to legitimation.

Third, what is the relationship between the official narrative and political contestation and policy? I'm not sure what Brand would answer, because she explicitly declares the reception of official narratives—that is, whether regimes are successful in their efforts at legitimation—beyond the study's bounds (p. 18). This might lead readers to think that leaders' legitimation instincts are unfailing. But of course they are not, or these regimes would have proved more durable. Addressing empirically and theoretically when leaders craft resonant legitimating narratives, when they fall short, and when they are compelled to turn to coercion alone would have helped answer the lingering "so what" question that may trouble readers at the end of this rich study.

Relatedly, what is the relationship between an effective legitimating narrative and policy debate? I would suggest that effective legitimating narratives become what I call, in *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, dominant narratives. However, in my account, control over those narratives does not lie exclusively in the hands of officialdom. Those holding the reins of power can themselves run afoul of dominant narratives and be punished for their transgressions, and narrative authority can shift, under specified conditions, to political opponents. In my view, dominant narratives neither shut down political contestation nor fully determine policy outcomes: They channel policy debate and render some policies unsustainable.

Finally, what kind of leadership, if any, does legitimation/narration make possible? In my work, I look to storytelling as a mechanism of leadership in social construction—as a means of fixing meaning, if always only relative and temporary. At times, Brand suggests, in contrast, that narration is more a matter of "fitting" claims to the preexisting visions of particular groups. In her account, resonant rhetoric, matching the view of the current configuration of forces, can supply a stable basis of political support. Thus, both Egyptian and Algerian leaders, in an attempt to undercut Islamists, altered the official narrative in ways that marked an embrace of Muslim heritage. What are the possibilities and limits of rhetorical leadership?

Brand's *Official Stories* is a rich and rewarding text. Its central premise is sound and much overlooked. Theoretically inclined scholars will find here two beautifully limned cases with which they must grapple. Students of both authoritarian and Arab politics will find here a challenge to their often materialist accounts. That the book raises more questions than it can answer is a mark of its unique and provocative contribution.

Response to Ronald R. Krebs' review of *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria*

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— Laurie A. Brand

Given the intersection of our interest in leaders' uses of national narratives, I am grateful to Ronald Krebs for his careful reading of my work and his suggestions for future directions, a number of which echo issues I raised in my review of his book.

As to what falls within the official narrative and what elements are open to change: National narratives are complex, multi-stranded, and hence require nuanced analysis to determine their boundaries. Krebs looked at one strand—that of national security understood in the traditional sense—but there are, depending upon case, many others: political ideology; economic philosophy; the

role of the military; key episodes of national history; as well as those that I focused on—the founding story (which can itself have multiple parts), the ethnic, cultural and religious components of identity, and the conception of national unity. I presented two country cases—comparable material on Jordan informed, but was not included in, the published work—and for each I studied three strands of the narrative. My work suggests a number of potentially generalizable findings, among which is the fact that founding stories seem particularly resistant to change and that, unlike what previous works on narratives have suggested, defeat in war does not seem to trigger revisions. However, further investigation is needed to extend the analysis regarding the possibilities of rescripting other narrative strands in these same countries, as well as to test these findings in other cases.

A related issue is that of the multivocality of many of the narrative's constituent elements. Analysis of these varied resonances requires not only careful readings of a large number of texts, but also a deep familiarity with a society's language(s), history and culture. My cases offer several examples of leaders' attempts to play on different registers of an existing element to legitimize what, ex ante, would have appeared unthinkable. Anwar Sadat managed discursively to turn military defeat in the 1973 October war into one of Egypt's greatest victories; and in 1988 when King Husayn announced Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank, he repurposed basic concepts from the hegemonic discourse of Arab solidarity to justify an otherwise heretical departure from Arab unity.

As for the limits of rescripting, those elements that have been longest and most widely emphasized should, by virtue of the presumed degree of inculcation among the public, be the most resistant to reformulation: basic identity characteristics, official national history, and the borders of the homeland. However, and related to Krebs' question regarding the relationship between an effective legitimating narrative and policy debate, the outcry triggered by Egyptian President al-Sisi's April 2016 announcement that Egypt would "return" to Saudi Arabia control of two islands is instructive. First, it shows that leaderships do miscalculate regarding influence of the existing narrative and its boundaries: a hypernationalistic military regime whose primary source of legitimation is a narrative claiming defense of the homeland *should* have anticipated a broad rejection of a relinquishment of sovereign territory. Second, however, it demonstrates that the state was more than prepared to repress those who dared to protest its transgression.

The coercive power of narratives is, of course, of a different order than that of tanks and guns. Much of what remains unexplained in Krebs' and my analyses relates directly to the sources, forms and practice of this power. Our studies both clearly show that students of politics have much more work to do to explain the bases and workings of this narrative coercion.

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