

# LEGITIMIZING THE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

*PhD, Jaroslav Zukerstein*

Charles University Prague, Czech Republic

---

## Abstract

Although the democracy and human rights promotion are among the top priorities of the U.S. foreign policy, administrations historically have also supported various authoritarian regimes. This framework for analysis based on the theory of propaganda and speech act theory suggests that there is a possibility to deconstruct the intentions of the U.S. administrations by disclosing the propaganda elements in a discursively constructed reality. The two-layer critical discourse analysis enables scholars to discover the methods the U.S. political elites use in a neo-gramscian sense to create a public consent with a foreign policy towards authoritarian regimes.

---

**Keywords:** United States, Foreign Policy, Legitimization, Critical Discourse Analysis, Authoritarian Regime

## Introduction

The spread of democracy, rule of law and human rights promotion are among the long-term and most prominent features of the foreign policy discourse of the United States. Washington has been commonly perceived as a guarantor of the democratic values, inherently related to the free capitalist world. However, particularly during the Cold War and also in the subsequent decades as a result of various geopolitical and other reasons the United States decided to support foreign regimes despite their poor human rights performance and in violation of the democratic principles and good governance. Historically, the support has not been only diplomatic, but Washington has offered economic and openly military aid.

Based on the observation that the U.S. society has been repeatedly able to voice the opposition to the fashion how various administrations handled the domestic and foreign policy issues, it is possible to assume that if the controversial foreign policy (such as the support of the authoritarian regime abroad) would reach a particular level, pointing on the discrepancy of what has been proclaimed about democracy and what has been actually performed, the U.S. electorate would voice the opposition opinion again.

Such behavior would be perceived negatively in the administration and thus efforts would have been made to eliminate the opposition. But what is the procedure to avoid it? How do the U.S. administrations legitimize the foreign policy which is considered problematic? The discursive use of sophisticated propaganda elements in the public appearances eventually enables to understand why the U.S. society historically decided not to express the disagreement with administrations.

## I.

To test the assumption that the U.S. administrations consciously and systematically have been spreading opinions and information about the foreign authoritarian regime in a way to avoid the voiced criticism and the being blamed for a hypocrisy for its foreign policy

performance and thus created a desirable social consciousness about an allied regime it is necessary to perform a two-layer discourse analysis.

Since a language does not only describe the world reality, but as a performative force it also enables us to construct the reality by social interaction and communication (Berger and Luckmann, 2011) in a way applicable to international relations (Onuf, 1989), the U.S foreign policy discourse could use the performative dimension of a language as a legitimization tool. Based on the speech act theory (Austin, 1975) the utterance formulated with a particular purpose has a power to change the socially constructed reality and shift its meaning as a performative utterance.

The U.S. foreign policy discourse could create, through speech act, a desirable constructed image of the foreign authoritarian regime by using the methods of the human mind manipulation or propaganda (Herman and Chomsky, 2011; Ellul, 1973). These methods could eventually be used systematically and on purpose, by repetition the discourse could become hyper-normalized and being created spontaneously (Yurchak, 2013). The set of methods is comprised by (but not limited to) demonizing the enemy, anti-communism, spread of fear, oversimplification, stereotyping, inevitable victory, glittering generalities, disinformation and many others.

Therefore, the first layer of the analysis has to focus on the normatively interpreted relations between the United States and the authoritarian regime, distributed solely within the administration and foreign policy community and undisclosed for public. The set of classified documents includes memoranda, letters, recommendations, dispatches, analyses by intelligence services and other. For historical research the data from National Security Archive, Foreign Relations of the United States, Declassified Document Reference System are suitable for analyses. The complementary source of data mainly for more contemporary history may include leaks as well. In this set of data it is possible to get an accurate notion of discourse from within, what kind of information the administrations have had and how did they assess the situation.

To find the answer to the questions how did the U.S. administrations tried to legitimize the foreign policy towards authoritarian regimes in front of its own electorate, how did the government officials explained the steps which they knew were contradictory with the long-standing proclaimed goals of the country's foreign policy and what kind of image of the foreign authoritarian regime has been constructed to legitimize such policy it is necessary to analyze the discursively constructed reality from a critical school of thought perspective. The U.S. official foreign policy discourse believes in a neo-gramscian sense that its own view on the relations with authoritarian regimes is the right one; therefore it requires constructing the framework in which the U.S. public would identify itself with the view of the political elites.

To deconstruct the reality discursively created and articulated by U.S. administrations and circulated by various media outlets the critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 1989, van Dijk, 2008) has to be performed. Bearing in mind the structure of information dominance of the political elites the use of specific words and their implicit meaning within the complex foreign policy discourse is to prove that the discrepancy between the proclaimed reality and actual reality does exist.

The specific events of bilateral importance can be linguistically confronted and the intention what kind of reality would wished to be constructed would become exposed. The confrontation analysis would also disclose what kinds of propaganda methods have been used. If the propaganda elements have been found, the historical analysis of relations between the United States and a foreign authoritarian regime enables to produce a set of techniques that have been used for legitimization of the controversial foreign policy. They could be therefore tested on the policies towards another regimes or more contemporary developments when declassified data is not widely available for research.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, the United States has considered itself as a guardian of democracy, rule of law and human rights in the free world and beyond. Sometimes, however, the paradox of promoting democracy and supporting dictators has emerged. While the support of the foreign authoritarian regime alone is not the issue to be questioned in this analysis, it is rather the fashion how to “sell” the policy, which is considered by Washington officials themselves as problematic, controversial or even so bad that the full details of the support should never be disclosed to the electorate who would eventually be in opposition to such policy. This framework for analysis is meant to disclose the sophisticated propaganda methods used by the U.S. political elites by analyzing the discursively constructed reality where as speech act theory indicates the propaganda elements would not have just a descriptive, but also a performative power.

## **References:**

- Austin, John Langshaw. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Open Road Media, 2011.
- Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Vintage Books, 1973.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Routledge, 2013.
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Random House, 2011.
- Onuf, Nicholas. *World of our making: rules and rule in social theory and international relations*. University of South Carolina Press, 1989.
- Van Dijk, Teun. *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Wodak, Ruth. *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing, 1989.
- Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2013.