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DISCURSIVE TACTICS OF RESISTANCE AND THE SHIFT AWAY FROM THE 'WAR ON TERROR' NARRATIVE

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On November 4, 2008, Americans elected Barack Obama the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States; and on January 20, 2009, American history turned the page from the Bush administration and started a new chapter with the Obama administration. Along with the change of administrative regimes in Washington came a shift in the regime of language, as well. With the Obama administration, the phrase 'war on terror' has subtly slipped out of presidential discourse, replaced by the simple reference to the two wars (rather than 'fronts' of a single war per Bush) in which America is engaged.

In this paper, I first examine the tactics used by opponents of the Bush administration to challenge his narrative about the 'war on terror' while he was in office. Opponents, including Senator Obama during his campaign, frequently reworked sound bites (e.g. 'central front in the war on terror') from the Bush narrative in an attempt to redefine the 'war on terror' in line with their own ideological position. I then examine the discursive shift that took place once Obama took office. As President of the United States, Obama now holds the Homeric *skeptron*, to use Bourdieu's (1991) analogy, and is vested with the authority to speak and to be heard on his own terms. Instead of responding to the agenda set by Bush, which required working within the 'war on terror' narrative to be accepted, Obama now holds, as Bourdieu (1991) describes, "the *delegated power* of the spokesperson" (107; italics in original). He holds the symbolic authority needed to set a new agenda, both discursively and politically. The tactic of redefinition is no longer needed, and the 'war on terror' simply fades from presidential discourse.

In examining the tactics of resistance used to challenge the Bush narrative, I draw from the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) and related concept of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980, inter alia), which emphasize that "any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases, and outright quotations of prior discourse" (Mannheim and Tedlock: 1995: 7). In responding to the Bush agenda, opponents must adopt his language to be heard and taken seriously. While the recycling of sound bites from Bush's discourse may work to reproduce and strengthen his narrative, fidelity from one context to the next is rarely maintained in the repetition of prior discourse. As Inoue (2006) suggests, all discourse exists "on moving discursive ground" (32). When discourse enters into subsequent contexts, it is inevitably reshaped to some degree. Thus, recontextualization leaves open the possibility for the introduction of new meanings and transformations of the text; and therein rests the potential for resistance and social transformation. I illustrate this process with data taken from examples of media discourse collected between 2001 and 2008. I conclude the paper with a look at the shift in Obama's discourse once he was elected president and assumed the presidency, drawing from speeches he gave on election night and during the first few months of his administration.

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