

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: “The Gloves Are Coming Off”: A Mixed Method Analysis of the Bush Administration’s Torture Memos

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This dissertation seeks to delineate some of the fault lines of the disparate worldviews and assumptions that have polarized our national discourse, as well as the imbalances of power they support or disrupt. Building on previous case studies of ideologically oppositional political blogs, the dissertation examines thirty-nine key documents from the website *torturingdemocracy.org*, primarily legal memos written by Bush Administration lawyers (the “Torture Memos”), to analyze a rhetoric of torture that, as a subset of the war on terror, serves as a “ground zero” of political values and motivations. Further, it seeks to combine mixed methods of analysis from various disciplines to help reveal the underlying beliefs and values that inform current national discourse.

The cross-disciplinary methods combine rhetorical, linguistic, and critical discourse analyses to examine and interrogate the language that created metaphorical and actual spaces in which torture was legalized, employed, and legitimated. Applying a grounded theory approach to Huckin’s four levels of linguistic granularity--context, text, phrase, and word (including the use of concordancing software)--the research reveals the logical fallacies, faulty argumentation, slippery word usage, linguistic and rhetorical manipulations, and finally, authoritarian underpinnings that characterize the memos. The research further uncovers multiple strategies used to create the Other, such as Lazar and Lazar’s four micro-strategies of “outcasting” (criminalization, (e)vilification, orientalization, and enemy construction), and strategies of minimizing or maximizing the positive and negative traits of in- versus out-groups in van Dijk’s “ideological square.”

The research shows how, in the language of the war on terror, words take on different, even opposite, meanings from previous significations, shifting the national debate about the legitimacy of torture as a hypothetical means of protection. Further, close examination reveals a different intent behind the memos than the

purported defense of the country used repeatedly to justify torture. Findings illuminate the memos as the products of authoritarian followers who enabled what Altemeyer calls “double highs”—ideological social dominants with an authoritarian worldview--in a wide-reaching and largely successful bid for power. Lastly, the dissertation points to the need to further investigate and articulate an anti-authoritarian, social egalitarian worldview as a challenge to power structures that, enshrined in language, may constitute a serious threat to democracy.