

Introducing Myth to Foreign Policy Analysis: The Blair Poodle Myth and Its Impact on Constructions of the “Special Relationship”

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This article introduces the concept of political myth to foreign policy analysis. It explains how myth can influence the construction of foreign policy events and decisions and creates a new lens that analysts can use to study this. To do that, this article draws upon conceptual literature on political myth to explain what myth is and how it shapes discursive constructions of the world. Adopting an interpretivist approach, it then uses the concept as a lens to analyze the impact that the Blair Poodle myth has had on the construction of the US–UK “special relationship” from 2002 to 2022 and considers how this has influenced the diplomatic behavior of five UK prime ministers. It finds that the myth has been integral to negative constructions of the “special relationship” over the past twenty years and has inspired political action, including protests, resignations, and more formal diplomatic engagement with the United States.

Este artículo introduce el concepto de mito político en el marco del análisis de la política exterior. El artículo explica cómo puede influir el mito político en la construcción de eventos y decisiones de política exterior y crea una nueva lente que pueden usar los analistas para estudiar este concepto. Para ello, este artículo se basa en la literatura conceptual sobre el mito político con el fin de explicar qué es el mito y cómo da forma a las construcciones discursivas del mundo. El artículo adopta un enfoque interpretativo y utiliza el concepto como lente para analizar el impacto que tuvo el mito de Blair como perrito faldero de Bush en la construcción de la «relación especial» entre Estados Unidos y el Reino Unido entre 2002 y 2022. El artículo también valora cómo esto ha influido esto en el comportamiento diplomático de cinco primeros ministros del Reino Unido. El artículo concluye que este mito ha sido una parte integral de las construcciones negativas de esta «relación especial» durante veinte años y ha inspirado acciones políticas, incluyendo protestas y renunciaciones, así como un compromiso diplomático más formal con los Estados Unidos.

Cet article introduit le concept de mythe politique en analyse politique internationale. Il explique l'influence des mythes dans la construction des événements et des décisions de politique étrangère avant de créer un nouvel angle que les analystes peuvent adopter pour son étude. Pour ce faire, cet article s'appuie sur la littérature conceptuelle sur le mythe politique afin de le définir et d'expliquer comment il façonne les constructions discursives du monde. En adoptant une approche interprétiviste, il utilise ensuite le concept comme angle d'analyse des conséquences du mythe de Tony Blair le caniche sur la construction de la « relation spéciale » entre États-Unis et Royaume-Uni de 2002 à 2022, avant de s'intéresser à son influence sur le comportement diplomatique de cinq Premiers ministres

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britanniques. Il conclut que le mythe a fait partie intégrante des constructions négatives de la « relation spéciale » sur vingt ans et qu'il a inspiré des actions politiques, notamment des manifestations, des démissions et des relations diplomatiques plus formelles avec les États-Unis.

Introduction

Political myths are a powerful form of narrative. They are semi-permanent discursive features that tell stories that shape how political groups interpret the world and how they act within it (Esch 2010, 362; Schmitt 2018, 488) and have been defined as “the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) . . . make significance of their experience and deeds” (Bottici 2007, 133). Many states have political myths, such as those about American Independence and the French Revolution (Bottici 2007, 182). Despite this and scholarly interest in narratives, there has been no significant attempt in foreign policy analysis (FPA) to study myths and their impact on the construction of foreign policy events and decisions. When scholars have engaged with the concept, they have done so in a haphazard way that often fails to engage with the myth literature, creating conceptual confusion. This article argues that this oversight limits scholarship and understandings of just how much influence myth can have on the construction of foreign policy. It addresses this issue by bringing the concept of myth into FPA as a new analytical lens that can be used in future scholarship.

To achieve its aim, this article first draws upon the literature on political myth to explore on a theoretical level how the concept of myth can contribute to knowledge on the construction of foreign policy events and decisions. It then demonstrates more empirically how the concept can function as an analytical lens by using it to study the Blair Poodle myth. This myth tells the story of Prime Minister Tony Blair acting like President George Bush’s poodle in the build-up to the 2003 Iraq war, obediently doing as his American master commanded, and it has been reproduced in discourse about the US–UK “special relationship” for nearly twenty years. This article analyzes this myth and its influence on the construction of the “special relationship” by adopting an interpretivist approach to study the telling of the Blair Poodle myth in British newspapers from 2002 to 2022 and its impact on US–UK relations.

This article finds that the Blair Poodle myth has played an important role in contributing to negative constructions of the US–UK relationship since 2002 and has acted as a rallying cry for more equal relations with the United States. Understanding the factors that shape interpretations of the US–UK relationship, such as the Blair Poodle myth, matters because the relationship is an important part of UK foreign and defense policy (Gamble 2003, 84; Gaskarth 2013, 49), especially in the post-Brexit world that it now occupies (Gamble 2018, 1229; Hill 2019, 22). In addition to demonstrating how myth can be used in FPA, this article finds that the myth has already had an influence on the way prime ministers have approached US presidents, encouraging more formal engagement between the leaders, and it will likely continue to do so for as long as it functions as a political myth.

Foreign Policy Analysis and Myths

To bring the study of political myth into FPA and to establish why it is worthwhile, it is first worth reviewing the existing literature on narratives, myths, and foreign policy. This section outlines how the FPA literature has approached myth and argues that despite the interest in narratives, the role of myth in constructing foreign policy events and decisions has lacked conceptual clarity, creating a blind spot for

FPA scholarship that limits the scope of future research. To address this issue, this section then explores how the literature on political myth can contribute to FPA by providing a new lens for interpreting the role that myths can play in discursively constructing foreign policy events and decisions.

A significant body of FPA scholarship explores foreign policy decisions and events using an interpretivist lens. Scholars that fall into this category provide “interpretations of interpretations,” they focus less on “historical fact” and more on “meaning, beliefs and discourses” on the understanding that “beliefs and practices are constitutive of each other” (Rhodes 2018, 3–4). Due to the belief that interpretations of the world shape behaviors within it, interpretivist FPA research often analyses narratives and the role that specific narratives play in constructing the world. For example, some scholars have argued that foreign policy failures are subjective and discursively constructed through narratives (Bovens and ’t Hart 1996, 2016; Kruck, Oppermann, and Spencer 2018; Eason, Daddow, and Cormac 2020), understood as storytelling devices that consist of characterizations, settings, and an emplotment (Oppermann and Spencer 2016). For interpretivists, narratives are discursive devices that shape how people see the world and how they act within it (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 321), purposely constructed to tell a specific version of events and used by political actors to shape the views and behaviors of others (Hart 1992).

Within FPA scholarship that employs the concept of narrative, the concept of myth has also regularly been deployed; however, it has lacked the conceptual clarity that narrative has enjoyed. Some scholars have approached myth objectively as a narrative based on untruth (Rudolf 2005; Braumoeller 2010; Schenoni et al. 2022). This scholarship avoids theoretical discussions about what myth is and usually adopts a myth-busting framing. Taking a more interpretivist approach, others have made the point that narratives carry political power by constructing specific versions of the world and normalizing particular social orders and practices, and then used the concept of myth as a synonym (Subotić 2016). This scholarship has made important contributions to FPA; however, the haphazard approach to myth creates conceptual confusion and limits its ability to act as a lens for studying foreign policy events and decisions on a larger scale. There has been no real engagement in FPA with the question, “what is myth?” let alone the question, “how does myth shape constructions of foreign policy events and decisions?”.

A recent exception to this underconceptualized approach to myth within FPA is Oliver Turner’s (2022) research on constructions of the frontier and American foreign policy, which engaged with definitions of myth found in the political philosophy literature. Turner used the political philosophy literature on myth to argue that US narratives about the frontier exist as myths, reproduced over time to create strategic narratives that portray “a virtuous United States facing the “savagery” of an uncivilized other” (Turner 2022, 15). Turner did not explicitly seek to explain how myth as a concept could contribute to FPA, function as an analytical lens, or fit with current understandings of narratives and foreign policy. However, his effective use of a more defined concept of myth to help explain the frontier and its relation to US foreign policy shows that a more considered understanding of myth can benefit FPA scholarship. Inspired by this, this article builds on Turner’s research by similarly drawing upon the literature on political myth, only this time with the explicit aim of plugging the concept into FPA, addressing the issues of conceptual clarity identified in the previous paragraph, and opening the way for a wave of new research on myth and foreign policy.

The literature on myth spans several academic disciplines, including politics, history, literary studies, anthropology, and philosophy, with the unfortunate effect of fragmenting the concept and impoverishing debate (Flood 2002, 3). Despite this, a body of work has begun to emerge that draws upon these fragmented debates to conceptualize political myth and the relationship myth has to politics, and it is this literature on which this article is based.

Myth and narrative are closely related concepts. For this reason, this article positions itself as building on and extending, rather than critiquing, narrative approaches. According to Boer (2009, 9), “the best definition of myth is the shortest: an important story.” Myths take on narrative form they commonly have protagonists within a plot with a beginning, middle, and end (Tudor 1972, 137). As established earlier in this section, narratives carry social and political power. They construct the way people understand the world and can be used to manipulate political landscapes. Some narratives, however, matter more than others. Some narratives help people understand the world and the origin of things better than others. Some narratives get reproduced for longer. Some narratives are instantly recognizable in the condensed form of symbols. Some narratives have more significance than others for the social group that tells, interprets, and retells them. It is across these dimensions where the concept of myth, as distinct from narrative, becomes apparent.

According to Chiara Bottici, who has led the way in her work on political myth, humans live in chaotic, changing environments within an indifferent world and seek “significance” to fight this (Bottici and Challand 2006, 319). The definition of “significance” here falls between “simple meaning” (which comes with all language) and larger questions of meaning often associated with religion (Bottici 2007, 125). Myths provide this by “inserting the world in a narrative of events” (Bottici and Challand 2006, 319). They ground events within a primary state and have a “proximization” element that makes events feel close to the individual (Esch 2010, 362). It is for this reason that they differ from narratives. Narratives provide “simple meaning” by putting events into an understandable plot; myth “makes significance of them” (Bottici 2007, 123). Explaining this further, Bottici (2007, 123–4) claims that “myth can be defined as that which makes things closer to us. While something can have a meaning, I can still be completely indifferent to it, something that is significant is something that I feel close to.”

Significance is subjective. What is significant for one person may not be for another, sometimes leaving myth as a driving force of social and political tension (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 21). Due to their subjective nature, political myths constantly get updated to produce significance, meaning they can be recognized as a process rather than an object:

In order to establish whether a narrative is a political myth or not, it is not only at its production that we must look, but rather, and foremost, at its reception. It is the way that a narrative is received that makes a political myth out of it. The whole system of production-reception-reproduction is what constitutes “the work on myth”. (Bottici and Challand 2006, 320)

From this view, political myths have a narrative core that gets updated according to circumstances. They “can be said to exist when accounts of a more or less common sequence of events, involving more or less the same principal actors, subject to more or less the same overall interpretation and implied means, circulate within a social group” (Flood 2002, 42). Oliver Schmitt expressed this clearly and also helped further disentangle myth and narrative with the statement:

Political myths are present within a specific political community as a semi-permanent feature. They are subject to gradual evolutions and adjustments, their content is sedimented over time, and it is impossible to pinpoint one single actor “crafting” a political myth: They are constantly actualised through multiple sources in order to fit the needs of a political community that those narratives become myths. On the opposite, strategic narrative are crafted by political actors with a specific intention in mind: influencing an audience. Therefore, a strategic narrative is one of the ways through which a political myth can be actualized. (Schmitt 2018, 488)

It is worth noting here that myth can be distinguished from alternative understandings of narrative as a process of updating abstract schematic templates because: (i)

myths respond to a need for significance; when a narrative does this, it becomes a myth; and (ii) myths are specific, not abstract. Some narratives follow schematic templates we can analyze in the abstract, such as narratives about misguided kings, wicked stepmothers, and lost children (Wertsch 2004, 60). Myths may map onto abstract narrative templates; however, they must respond to a need for significance to act as myths. Furthermore, to the extent that myths can be understood as a process of production, reception, and reproduction in the evolving quest for significance, they exist as specific narratives (rather than abstract collections of narratives) updated to meet the specific needs of a specific political community.

Political myths have a further practical function; they act as “mapping devices through which we look at the world, feel about it and therefore also act within it as a social group” (Bottici and Challand 2006, 321). They are “attuned to the political experiences and deeds of a social group or society and must always direct or offer guidance to social action in a way that is pertinent, compelling and up-to-date” (De Veriese 2017, 815). They have been likened to lenses that allow us to reduce and comprehend the world’s complexity, from that shaping behavior (Heuser and Buffet 1998, 4; Bottici and Challand 2006, 321).

A final important aspect of myth is its close relationship with symbols. Flood (2002, 42) argues that “like sacred myths, political myths can be represented in iconic forms such as paintings, posters, and sculpted monuments.” Bottici (2007, 4) added that “myths operate through symbols, but not all symbols are myths: the sequence of letters of a mathematical equation is also a symbol, but nobody—or only a few—would argue that it is a myth.”

From this, it is clear that to treat myths as simply being untruthful narratives, while useful for positivist “myth-busting” research, impoverishes the concept and fails to grapple with the more profound social power of myth. As argued by Bottici, they are not best explored in the positivist tradition: “Political myths cannot be falsified because they are not scientific hypotheses as to the constitution of the world or astrological almanacs that foretell the future” (Bottici and Challand 2006, 321). Instead, they are “a practical tool to provide guidance and orientation” in the world (De Veriese 2017, 815).

Before further considering and demonstrating how myth can contribute to FPA and narrative policy analysis, it is worth looking at an example of a collection of myths that exert political influence today—the Churchill myths. Fielding, Scjwarz, and Toye (2020) argue that narratives about Churchill are a collection of myths that have shaped and continue to shape the British political landscape.

When the face of the people is perceived to be in danger, however highly strung these fears may be judged, Churchill is on hand to enter the frame. Those identified as the enemies shape-shift, but the persona of Churchill remains, it seems, implacably resilient. Just when it looks as if he has served his time and all life within him is spent, back he comes, growling and thundering, the principal lead in the national melodrama. In popular iconography, he is reduced to his growl, to his V-for-victory gesture, to his cigar, or to his hat. These signs, working as a code instantly decipherable to those in the know, are familiar features in the nation’s mental landscape. Even so: he never goes away; he is always on hand, awaiting his moment. And as things stand, it is overbearingly likely that future generations will remain, unwilling, subject to his memory. (Fielding, Scjwarz, and Toye 2020, 2–3)

Stories of Churchill get reproduced over time and act as analytical lenses that make significance of contemporary political circumstances for particular political communities and proscribe correct courses of action, particularly when “toughness” is required (Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye 2020, 81). Looking at recent examples, Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye (2020) argue that during the Brexit referendum in 2016, narratives of Churchill featuring “echoes of May 1940, when Britain “stood alone” free from European entanglements” were reproduced by Brexiteers to make

significance of the new political situation that they faced and to call for political action (Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye 2020, 8). Remainers similarly deployed the myth of Churchill, only this time as a challenge to Brexit and an argument for European integration. To Remainers, “Churchill was a man of international engagement, not one seeking isolationism” (Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye 2020, 8).

For many, then, narratives about Churchill are more than just stories, powerful though stories are. They relate to something more profound and have a deeper impact. Narratives about Churchill, instantly recognizable in symbolic forms, have been reproduced over many years by different political communities to interpret their contemporary political situation, make significance of it, and set out a path forward.

“He”—what he has come to represent—has transmogrified into a deeper, more troubling, and darker phenomenon in which the past weighs unforgivingly on the present. He is a constant point of reference in political discussion and popular culture, in which we are all implicated. (Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye 2020, 2)

This example again indicates some of the analytical value that the concept of myth has brought to politics as a discipline, and given the impact of Churchill myths on Brexit, there is good reason to believe myth can add to FPA too. FPA scholars are clearly interested in myth (Rudolf 2005; Braumoeller 2010; Subotić 2016; Schenoni et al. 2022; Turner 2022) but have not been entirely successful at describing what it is, leaving its analytical potential untapped. By using the literature on political myth to identify how myths can shape constructions of foreign policy, this article contends that FPA scholars can study the impact of specific myths in shaping constructions of foreign policy events and decisions with greater conceptual clarity, thus opening the way for a new wave of FPA scholarship that builds on and complements narrative-oriented approaches to study the impact of myth on specific foreign policies.

The Truth Behind the Blair Poodle Myth

To appreciate how political myth can help create a new avenue for FPA scholarship and why it is worthwhile, this article uses the concept to analyze the Blair Poodle myth and its impact on the construction of the US–UK relationship. The US–UK “special relationship” has been the subject of much analysis over the years, and despite questions over just how “special” it really is, it is widely considered to be one of the UK’s most important diplomatic relationships (Gamble 2003, 84; Gaskarth 2013, 49). This has been heightened by Brexit and the lack of a joined-up conceptualization of how the United Kingdom should approach the United States (Gamble 2018, 1229; Hill 2019, 22). While the “special relationship” is considered much more than a personal relationship between the Prime Minister and President, the personal relationship has often been used as a heuristic for the health of US–UK diplomatic relations (Hill 2019, 22, 129). In this context, the relationship between leaders has been subject to much media and scholarly attention.

In June 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson met President Joe Biden for the first time. Alongside news reports that Johnson was planning to abandon the long-used phrase the “special relationship” on the basis that it made the United Kingdom look “needy” (Fisher 2021), news coverage was awash with references to the “poodle-like” relationship that Blair enjoyed with Bush in the early 2000s, and the need for Johnson to learn from this failure (Clark 2021; Meyer 2021; Prichard-Jones 2021). The poodle narrative similarly featured within political discourse when Theresa May met Donald Trump in 2017 (Kettle 2017; Smith 2017; Winning 2017) and when David Cameron supported Barack Obama’s campaign to tackle Syrian chemical weapons in 2013 (Glover 2013; Hastings 2013; Wright and Cusick 2013). Indeed, from Blair to Johnson, the poodle narrative has been reproduced in press coverage almost every time a US President has met a UK Prime Minister, influencing constructions of

the “special relationship” by framing it within the disastrous story of the Iraq war. Despite this, most scholarship has, within a more positivist tradition, been more concerned with establishing whether Blair acted like Bush’s poodle (Sharp 2004; Azubuike 2005; Dunn 2008; McHugh 2010; Porter 2010, 360) than with whether the narrative has functioned as a political myth that has shaped US–UK diplomatic relations and behavior since 2002. This article is only concerned with the latter, less studied, issue.

Using myth as an analytical lens, this article explores the more contemporary issue of how the Blair Poodle myth has developed and functioned as a myth for political communities skeptical of close US–UK relations. This article adopts an interpretivist approach to study the work on the Blair Poodle Myth within UK newspapers from the first telling of the narrative in 2002 through 2022, spanning five UK prime ministers and four US presidents. The newspapers were collated by using the search terms “Blair” and “poodle” in LexisNexis and then analyzed for their contribution to the work on the myth process as described by Bottici (2007). These articles are cited throughout the proceeding section alongside reflections on how they contribute to work on the myth and how they overlay with understandings of how prime ministers approached the US–UK “special relationship.”

The Poodle Myth and Constructions of the “Special Relationship”

This article argues that the Blair Poodle narrative has functioned as a political myth that, from 2002 to 2022, has shaped negative constructions of one of the UK’s more important diplomatic relationships. It has influenced calls for more equal engagement with the United States, often through the promise of a strong and independent Britain, and inspired more formalized interactions between leaders. To make this argument, this section starts by exploring the context surrounding the myth’s construction and argues that the myth was simply an evolution of narratives that had come before, reflective of the constant process of updating that comes with work on myth. It then analyzes the construction of the Blair Poodle myth from 2002 to 2003. It argues that the narrative was initially used to critique Blair, explain and ground events, and call for specific political actions. Following that, this section analyses the deployment of the myth under Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson. It identifies how the narrative has functioned as a political myth over these years and considers how it has shaped negative constructions of the US–UK “special relationship” and UK diplomatic practice. This, in turn, showcases how the concept of political myth can function as an analytical lens in FPA research and opens a new pathway for narrative-focused research within the subdiscipline.

Laying the Groundwork: British Skepticism of the United States

While UK policymakers put much weight on the idea of a “special relationship” between the United States and the United Kingdom, some political communities in the United Kingdom have been skeptical of the United States and the value that comes from the United Kingdom being close to it. Narratives that have functioned as critiques of close US–UK relations existed well before the construction of the Blair Poodle myth in 2002. Indeed, in 1983, Labour MP Denis Healy called Margaret Thatcher “Regan’s poodle” following the US invasion of Grenada (Deer 2004, 163). Similar slurs include the claim that the United Kingdom is a “satellite state of the United States” and the claim that the United Kingdom is the “51st state of America” (Gamble 2003, 83), a contrast to the constructions of imperial Britain during the height of the empire. Since it tells the story of Blair subserviently dragging the United Kingdom to war under Bush’s orders, the Blair Poodle myth fits within this lineage of narratives that have critiqued the US–UK “special relationship” by constructing the United Kingdom as being subservient to the United States.

Exploring work on these older subservience narratives further, the events of the Suez crisis forced British policymakers to recognize that the United Kingdom could no longer act independently of the United States (Kettle 2018, 43–59). After this experience, the narratives of UK subservience to the United States, not unrelated to claims of British decline, were reproduced within different discursive settings to tell a story of British governments being intimidated by the might of the United States into acting against the UK's interests (Deer 2004, 166), deflecting from a lack of capability. A famous example of this can be found in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2021, 5), which characterized the United Kingdom as "Airstrip One," a critique of the UK's unflinching role in providing airbases for the US Air Force (Deer 2004, 166). This critique was later reproduced in the actual year 1984, when a book by Duncan Campbell called the United Kingdom "the unsinkable aircraft carrier" after US planes based in the United Kingdom were used to conduct airstrikes on Libya (Deer 2004, 166). Later, this narrative was reproduced again in music with the release of the songs "51st State" by New Model Army and "Heartland" by The The, which both accused the United Kingdom of being the "51st state of America."

These narratives of UK subservience continued into the early Blair years, one notable example being a newspaper article authored by future Mayor of London Ken Livingstone titled "Uncle Sam's Patsy" (Livingstone 1998, 48–49), which promoted conspiratorial claims about US influence over the United Kingdom. This period also saw the publication of several political cartoons that promoted the subservience narrative and Blair's role in it. For example, in February 1998, the *Observer* published a cartoon about weapons inspections in Iraq that depicted President Clinton as a large and intimidating American police officer, with Blair standing beside him as a small child-like British police officer saying, "whatever he says with knobs on" (Riddell 1998). This incomplete history demonstrates that specific narratives about UK subservience to the United States existed before specific narratives about Blair being Bush's poodle, something that is worth keeping in mind given the existence of myth as "work on a common narrative by which members of a social group (or society) . . . make significance of their political experiences and deeds" (Bottici 2007, 179).

Work on Myth: Constructing the Blair Poodle Myth

Turning toward the construction of the Blair Poodle myth, following a series of cartoons that depicted Blair as Bush's obedient dog (Brown 2001; Bell 2002; Riddell 2002), the specific narrative in full form first appeared in British newspapers in February 2002. Not long after Bush made his infamous "axis of evil" speech, the *Mirror* ran an article headlined, "nod, nod, it's poodle Blair; Bush is taking him for a ride" (Routledge 2002, 4–5). It accused Blair of being weak as the hawkish president moved his gaze to Iraq and North Korea and was influenced by older UK subservience narratives, reproducing them with the jibe, "Downing Street will in future be known as The Little White House, and Chequers becomes The Ranch House. These name changes are being adopted to avoid any misunderstanding about Britain's role as the 50-something state of the USA."

The *Mirror* repeated this over the next few months as Blair prepared to meet Bush at his ranch in Crawford. Just before the meeting, it published an article that called on Blair to show his "fangs," opening with the paragraph: "the *Mirror* doesn't call the Prime Minister a poodle lightly. But it is an image Tony Blair has created in many people's minds since the terrible events of September 11" (The *Mirror* 2002, 6). Constructing Blair's actions as a failure to stand up for the United Kingdom, it insinuated he had become little more than "Bush's virtual ambassador." After the Crawford meeting, the newspaper repeated the myth, claiming that Blair "obviously enjoyed his weekend stay in a Texan poodle parlour," putting on a hawkish per-

formance that was “painfully embarrassing, enough to make you ashamed of being British” (Routledge 2002).

Myths come in narrative form, and narratives consist of characterizations, settings, and an emplotment (Oppermann and Spencer 2018). The Blair Poodle myth, as primarily constructed by the *Mirror*, had these elements. It characterized Blair as a poodle, a lapdog for Bush that did whatever its master wanted. The setting was a steady march toward war with Iraq, as the United States and United Kingdom employed hawkish language about the state and its alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The emplotment told a story of a subservient Blair dragging the United Kingdom in whatever direction Bush commanded, undermining British sovereignty and Britain’s place in the world while also increasing the chances of war in Iraq. This narrative, itself just one of a lineage of narratives that have constructed the United Kingdom as being subservient to the United States, explained what was happening now by grounding events within the primary state of UK subservience, explained what significant consequences would occur because of this, and called for the United Kingdom to adopt a more independent stance to avoid catastrophe. The narrative, therefore, did more than tell a story to create and convey meaning. It reproduced old subservience narratives and, using the symbolism of an obedient and attention-seeking lapdog, provided a cognitive schema for making sense of the world. It made significance of what was happening by drawing attention to negative consequences and started to function as a determination to act by proscribing resistance to the United States. Here, then, the work on myth process starts to become visible.

While other newspapers did occasionally promote the Blair Poodle myth in this period, for example, on March 9, 2002, the *Daily Telegraph* published a story covering the opinions of “people in the Half Moon pub in Mildenhall” who thought that “Blair should stop acting like George Bush’s poodle” (Gimson 2002), it is important to note that these were exceptions to a generally pro-war sentiment that dominated the press. Political myths are subjective. What is a myth for one political community can be an insignificant narrative for another (Bottici 2007, 216). In this case, the myth was never going to make significance of events for communities that believed the United Kingdom should be close to the United States. It told a coherent and dramatic story of UK subservience to the United States, with clear negative consequences that implied a need for action to avoid them. Its audience consisted of people skeptical of the US–UK “special relationship.” Therefore, its containment to the *Mirror* in the prewar period is unsurprising. The *Mirror* was now known as a left-leaning newspaper undergoing a significant relaunch as part of a drive by its editor, Piers Morgan, to address its declining readership (Freedman 2017, 62–63). It wanted “to adopt a broadly left-wing, “Old Labour” position that challenged both the domestic and international perspectives of the New Labour Government” (Freedman 2017, 63). The Blair Poodle myth did this, actualizing and reproducing older subservience narratives for the new “War on Terror,” feeding on American skepticism that was widespread and well established among the left-leaning “Old Labour” wing of the Labour Party (Gamble 2003, 119; Phythian 2011).

The Blair Poodle myth, which conveyed an old narrative of UK subservience to the United States, was quickly reproduced in popular culture. The first notable instance was when George Michael released the song *Shoot the Dog* in July 2002. The animated music video included a scene that depicted George Bush throwing a ball on the lawn of the White House for his dog, Tony Blair, to chase. Political myths can often be condensed into images or icons, which, while not taking a narrative form, come to represent the narrative: “by means of a synecdoche, any object or gesture—a painting, an image, a song, a film, an advertisement, a gesture—can recall the whole work on myth that lies behind it” (Bottici 2007, 181–2). In this instance, the icon was Blair, depicted as Bush’s dog. The film *Love Actually* similarly reproduced the myth when the fictional Prime Minister, played by Hugh Grant,

transitioned from his default approach of deference to the US President into a position of resistance, framed as standing up to a “bully.”

As 2002 and 2003 rolled on, the *Mirror* continued as the only mainstream British newspaper to work on the Blair Poodle myth, including when Blair met Bush at Camp David in September 2002 (Roberts 2002, 4–5), when the United States and United Kingdom attempted to get UN authorization for war not long after (Hardy 2002), when large antiwar protests took place outside of Parliament (Routledge 2003b, 17), and when several Labour MPs rebelled in a vote on military action (Routledge 2003a, 4–5). These last two examples were political actions taken by members of the public and MPs that were concerned about UK subservience to the United States, a view that the Blair Poodle myth helped to construct. At this point, MPs were aware of polling that suggested most members of the public were against war, and a lot of Labour MPs were skeptical of George Bush (Cowley 2005, 111). Indeed, on March 12, 2003, some Labour MPs even reportedly attempted to establish a special conference to remove Blair, using the argument, “it is time for the Prime Minister to consider his position. If he is not prepared to stand up to George Bush, he must make way for those that will” (Cowley 2005, 126). While this does not use the language of the Blair Poodle myth, it does use its framing. Taken together, this shows that the myth was now a prominent feature in public discourse that helped to explain foreign policy events by reproducing old subservience narratives, made significance of them for those skeptical of the “special relationship,” and inspired political action to prevent war.

Work on Myth: Repeating the Blair Poodle Myth

Once the war began in March 2003, a little hiatus occurred as attention shifted toward the need to support troops (Freedman 2017, 102–3). That said, references continued to feature on rare occasions, one notable example being when Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development, resigned and called Blair a “fig leaf” because “poodles jump off, get off their lead and jump about. Fig leaves just about stay where they are” (White 2003, 3). This is an example of a Minister explicitly reproducing the Blair Poodle myth to justify her political actions. After this, it was not long before newspapers again began asking questions about why the United Kingdom went to war in Iraq, prompting a resurgence of the myth.

In a change from the prewar period, more right-leaning newspapers began to use the myth in their constructions of US–UK relations, often as a call to assert British sovereignty in the shadow of the increasingly controversial US-led war. In April 2004, the *Mail on Sunday* called on Blair to assert himself with a threat to withdraw troops and accused him of having been “content to act as little more than George Bush’s poodle and international apologist” (Oborne 2004, 23). A few months later, the *Daily Mail* did something similar in an article that ended with the sentence, “a patsy in Europe, a poodle in America what is left of an independent British foreign policy now?” (Daily Mail 2004, 12). This widening in the narrative’s audience from the *Mirror* to the *Daily Mail* reflects a widening in who it was able to make significance for. Before the war, the Blair Poodle myth was almost exclusively used by left-leaning communities skeptical of US dominance. After the war, it also began to “speak” to those on the right of Blair concerned about the now visible costs of the US-led war. The right-wing press used the myth to place the blame for what was seen to be going wrong on Blair, using the old framing of subservience. It suggested that this would continue as the natural state of things unless something changed and called for specific political action in the form of more equal engagement with the United States, promoting images of a stronger and more independent United Kingdom. The myth thus began to influence constructions of the “special relationship” from different quarters of the British press.

The myth continued to haunt Blair during the 2005 General Election (Elder 2005, 14; Sheridan 2005, 29; Stothard 2005, 4) and, following that, whenever events thrust “the special relationship” into the spotlight. This was usually following the release of new information about the decision to invade Iraq (Blackman 2005, 4; Daily Mail 2005, 12; Jenkins 2005, 16) and public interactions between Blair and Bush (Lucas 2006, 4; Moore 2006; Sunday Mirror 2006, 14; The Sunday Times 2006, 18; 11 Wilson 2006, 1). The narrative of subservience reproduced in the newly packaged Blair Poodle myth shaped how the US–UK “special relationship” was discursively constructed under Blair, made significance of events for those that were skeptical of the diplomatic partnership and critical of the Iraq war, and called for (and inspired) political action.

Work on Myth: Brown–Cameron

Blair’s departure in 2007 did not spell the end of the Blair Poodle myth’s place within public discourse about the special relationship, indicative of its existence as more than a mere failure narrative used against Blair. Once Gordon Brown took office, he quickly visited Bush, prompting a flood of references to Blair’s poodle-like behavior. The *Independent* predicted “that after poodle Blair, the new Prime Minister will put some distance between himself and Washington” (Cornwell 2007, 35), and the *Observer* noted that “the Brown camp knows that the perception of Blair as Bush’s poodle was a key factor in undermining the former Prime Minister” (Watt 2007, 1). These predictions were later paraded as correct because Brown’s first meeting with Bush was widely proclaimed to have been much more professional than that observed under Blair (Brogan 2007, 4; Freedland 2007; Simpson 2007, 5). Similarly, academic research has noted Brown’s stand-off style and attributed it to his desire to avoid critiques of being too close to Bush (Dunn 2011, 7; Xu and Rees 2018, 503), critiques that the Blair Poodle myth contributed to. While maintaining a clear commitment to the United States and the idea of a “special relationship,” Brown demonstrated a personal coolness toward Bush and, rather than engaging on a first-name basis, called him “Mr President” (Sanders and Houghton 2017, 188; Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018, 301).

Far from being a one-off and indicative of its status as a myth, the story of Blair the poodle was repeated whenever Brown met with Bush (Hurst 2007, 2; Temko 2008, 1; Weaver 2008), and after Obama was elected, this trend continued. The *Sunday Telegraph* proclaimed, “the new President will never shout ‘Yo Brown!’ to a poodle Prime Minister, but defer as apprentice to the judgment of Gordon the Greybeard” (d’Ancona 2008, 27), while the *Mirror* more cautiously stated, “we will see whether the Obama-Brown relationship is something new, progressive and mutually beneficial—or simply a re-run of Bush-Blair. Back in the poodle Parlour!” (Routledge 2008, 37). The Blair Poodle myth had outlived Blair and Bush. It was now being reproduced to frame the diplomatic behavior of a new UK Prime Minister with a new US President.

This use of the Blair Poodle myth to filter the Brown–Obama relationship, and to call for independence from Obama, continued throughout Brown’s tenure as Prime Minister, influencing numerous news reports about meetings between the two leaders (Osborne 2009, 33; Parsons 2009, 13; Roberts 2009, 4–5; Shipman 2009, 21). It also featured in a report by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on the UK–UK relationship in 2010, which, among many conclusions, suggested the myth had real political consequences:

We conclude that the perception that the British Government was a subservient “poodle” to the US Administration leading up to the period of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is widespread both among the British public and overseas and that this

perception, whatever its relation to reality, is deeply damaging to the reputation and interests of the UK. (*Foreign Affairs Select Committee* 2010, 6)

Almost immediately after David Cameron became Prime Minister in May 2010, the *Guardian* published an article calling on him to avoid Blair's poodle-like behavior (*Tisdall* 2010, 21). Shortly after, the *Mirror* used the myth to interpret and attack the new government's approach to the United States. On June 4, it published an article that had the opening line, "if Blair was Bush's poodle, Foreign Secretary William Hague is acting like Hillary Clinton's Pomeranian," after "he failed to condemn Israel's act of state piracy against aid activists" (*Routledge* 2010, 35). On July 22, it did something similar again in an article on Cameron's first visit to Washington, stating, "Cameron says that under him we won't be America's poodle but he fools no one. We'll still be Mutley to their Dick Dastardly" (*Reade* 2010, 23). Once again, the Blair Poodle myth was being reproduced to help explain Cameron's approach to the US–UK "special relationship" using the language of subservience, to make significance of Cameron's behavior for those skeptical of the relationship by contextualizing it in the horror story of the Iraq war, and to call for more equal relations with the United States to avoid repeating past mistakes.

As with Brown, the myth continued to appear in discourse almost every time Cameron publicly interacted with Obama. For example, when they met in March 2012, the *Times* proclaimed, "after the mutual love of the Clinton-Blair years, the 'poodle' Blair-Bush era and the neediness of Gordon Brown, Mr Cameron was determined to open a new chapter of more grown-up, practical relations" (*Watson* 2012, 6–7), and the *Telegraph* suggested Cameron might be a Labrador rather than a poodle, on account of his background in hunting (*Norman* 2012), a construction that maintains the symbolic image of an obedient dog. That said, nothing stoked reproductions of the myth more than debates about military intervention in Syria in 2013. On this issue, the *Daily Mail* drew on the myth the most. One article, titled "A Disaster? No it's High Time Britain Stopped Being Uncle Sam's Poodle" (*Hastings* 2013) reproduced the Blair Poodle myth by claiming that Cameron had "sought to follow Anthony Eden at Suez and Tony Blair in Iraq by launching a fumbled military adventure which Parliament has summarily aborted." In a second article, it stated, "Mr Cameron continues where Tony Blair, a much wilder fantasist, left off," and concluded, "just because President Obama has decided wrong-headedly, in my view, to fire missiles at Syria, we should not trot along obediently as the ever-loyal poodle" (*Glover* 2013). This shows that work on the myth was evident under Cameron's premiership. It continued to act as a political myth for those skeptical of the US–UK "special relationship" and was now a semi-permanent feature in discourse, as political myths are (*Schmitt* 2018, 488).

On July 6, 2016, just before Cameron left office, the UK's Iraq Inquiry published its report on the causes and conduct of the war. On the political left, the *Daily Mirror* proclaimed that the report showed "[that] the Prime Minister had a slavish devotion to Bush" (*Blanchard* 2016, 4–5). A separate article also argued that the report was "damning, damning, damning" of "Blair's poodle-like pledges to George Bush" and that he "must accept his damnation" for his decisions (*Daily Mirror* 2016, 12). On the political right, the *Daily Mail* published an article titled "UK didn't have to be US poodle," which claimed that the report implied Blair chose to be a poodle (*Doyle* 2016). Even the *Sun*, which had previously not engaged with the Poodle Myth all that much, concluded that the report "makes painfully plain that Blair acted as a wailing poodle to America's big dog" (*The Sun* 2016, 10). That said, on this occasion, the story of Blair acting as Bush's poodle was mainly being used more as a traditional failure narrative that accused Blair of historical wrongdoing rather than as a political myth that made significance of them.

Work on Myth: May–Johnson

When Theresa May took office in July 2016, it had been over thirteen years since troops were sent to Iraq. Despite this, the myth continued to be reproduced in public discourse, shaping how US–UK relations were constructed. The first newspaper article to do this was published in October 2016 by the *Daily Mail* under the title “why has Boris suddenly become a warmonger?” a reference to May’s Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson ([Daily Mail 2016](#)). In this article, the *Daily Mail* asserted that the Foreign Office “believes Britain should be America’s poodle,” and because of this, “Tony Blair pathetically followed this brief to the letter taking orders from the White House. Whatever George W. Bush wanted, Tony Blair did. Hence the calamity of the Iraq war.”

As had long been the case, the Blair Poodle myth still “spoke” to political communities worried about the United Kingdom adopting a subservient position to the United States, crossing political divides. Around three months after the *Guardian* reproduced the myth to interpret May’s first meeting with President Trump in January 2017 (Wintour 2017), the *Mail on Sunday* again accused Johnson of being Trump’s poodle after he reportedly canceled a summit on the war in Syria at the President’s request ([Owen, Gallagher, and Stewart 2017](#)). To emphasize the point, the article also stated, “the poodle claim against Mr Johnson is particularly wounding as it echoes the allegations made against the former Prime Minister Tony Blair.” May was also compared to Blair in a *Daily Mirror* article titled “I am not Trump’s poodle” ([Gregory 2018](#), 4–5). Scholars have argued that May attempted to demonstrate a firm commitment to the US–UK “special relationship,” likely because of Brexit pressures, despite indifference from President Trump ([Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018](#), 325). It is clear from the newspaper discourse analyzed here that May’s actions, and the actions of her government, were interpreted using the Blair Poodle myth, which again made significance of the relationship by grounding contemporary events using a story that had disastrous consequences and using this to make predictions for the future.

After Johnson took over as Prime Minister in July 2019, the Blair Poodle myth lived on when US–UK relations came into view. In January 2020, the *Guardian* published an article on Trump’s approach to the Middle East and how Johnson should manage Trump in this context. Once again, events were interpreted through the lens of the myth:

Mr Johnson faces the first test of Britain’s post-Brexit foreign policy posture. Unlike George W Bush, Mr Trump won’t offer the British Prime Minister a way to sit out any upcoming war. . . Jumping into the trenches with the US over a war Britain does not want may be the price Mr Johnson has to pay for a post-Brexit US-UK trade deal. . . Mr Blair was derided because it was said he had let Britain become America’s poodle. This time the country risks ending up as its lapdog. ([The Guardian 2020](#))

This accusation that Johnson was copying the poodle-like behavior of Blair continued into the Biden presidency. Just before he met Biden for the first time, the *Daily Mail* reported that Johnson disliked the phrase “special relationship” on the basis that it made the United Kingdom look “needy” ([Fisher 2021](#)). The same article also stated that the special relationship had “encouraged prime ministers to behave like poodles” and that “it has become an end in itself instead of a means of securing British interests, a charge often levelled at Tony Blair.” As occurred with Brown and is reflective of the policy impact that myths can have by shaping discourse, Johnson’s dismissal of the “special relationship” as making the United Kingdom look “needy” indicates a desire from the Prime Minister to distance himself from the subservient image that the narrative helped to construct. It is questionable how successful he has been because when he met Biden, the *Sun* used a “body language

expert” to analyze their interactions and described Johnson as “submissive,” behavior that “was a throwback to the Blair-Brown days and even suggested the PM might be Biden’s new ‘poodle’” (Clark 2021). While it is reasonable to question the validity of findings from a “body language expert,” the use of the Blair Poodle myth to shape interpretations of Johnson’s diplomatic behavior is apparent.

Johnson may have been the UK’s fourth Prime Minister since Blair, and he may have wanted to distance himself from comparisons to Blair, but still, Johnson’s actions, like those of May, Cameron, and Brown, were interpreted through the lens of the myth. From 2002 to 2022, this myth has done more than merely tell a story to create meaning for some political purpose. It has, at different times and in different ways, explained events by grounding them in reproduced narratives of subservience and decline, made significance of events by drawing on the emotive story of the Iraq war, and inspired calls for more equal relations with the United States. Often compressed into the symbolic image of a lapdog, it has shaped how some political communities understood the “special relationship” and, more importantly, made them care about it.

By shaping discursive constructions of the US–UK special relationship, the Blair Poodle myth has seemingly impacted the UK’s diplomatic behavior. Under Blair, the perception of UK subservience to the United States that was fostered by the myth-inspired protests and parliamentary rebellions on the Iraq war and calls from some backbench MPs for a change in leadership. There is evidence to suggest Brown sought to have a close but formal relationship with Bush because of the myth, and reportedly, Johnson was even willing to abandon the phrase “special relationship” on the basis that it made the United Kingdom look “needy,” as depicted in the twenty-year-old Blair Poodle myth. The US–UK special relationship is a central part of UK defense and foreign policy, especially in the post-Brexit world (Gamble 2018, 1229; Hill 2019, 22), and the way people perceive the world shapes their actions, so it is important to understand what shapes perceptions of the relationship. This article has demonstrated that the Blair Poodle myth has played an important role in shaping more critical interpretations of the US–UK “special relationship” and has even had “real world” diplomatic consequences, something that previous positivist research on the myth has missed.

Conclusion

This article aimed to introduce the concept of political myth to the FPA. It sought to explain how myth can influence the construction of foreign policy events and decisions and to create a new lens that analysts can use to study this. To do that, this article plugged the concept of political myth into FPA and demonstrated how the concept could function as an analytical lens by using it to explain how the Blair Poodle myth has shaped negative constructions of the US–UK special relationship from 2002 to 2022. This allowed the article to contribute to the FPA literature by opening the way for a new wave of research on myth and foreign policy. It also allowed it to contribute to the understanding of British foreign policy by identifying how the Blair Poodle myth has shaped constructions of the US–UK relationship and diplomatic practice.

Regarding its contributions to FPA, this article argued that while there has been clear interest in exploring how myth and foreign policy interact with each other (Rudolf 2005; Braumoeller 2010; Subotić 2016; Schenoni et al. 2022; Turner 2022), a lack of engagement with the literature on political myth meant this research was often conceptually confused and failed to fully grasp how myth can relate to foreign policy. To address that, this article then drew on the literature on political myth, understood in short as “the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) . . . make significance of their experience and deeds” (Bottici 2007, 133). Myths make significance of foreign policy events and decisions

for a given political community; they are semipermanent discursive features continually edited over time in a process of “work on myth”; they can be condensed into symbols; and they explain foreign policy events by grounding them in a primary state. From there, they shape how people act in the foreign policy arena. By clearly conceptualizing how myth can impact foreign policy and demonstrating how it can be analyzed, this article offers a launch point for future FPA scholarship, complementing and extending narrative-based approaches.

This article demonstrated how the concept of myth could function as an analytical lens for better understanding constructions of foreign policy by exploring how the Blair Poodle myth has shaped negative constructions of the US–UK “special relationship” and UK diplomatic behavior. It was argued that the myth grounded events by reproducing older UK subservience narratives and made significance of events through the emotive story of British decline and the Iraq war. This, inevitably, inspired some political action. Under Blair, it contributed to large protests, backbench rebellions, and calls for a change in leadership; under Brown, it led to more formal interactions between the Prime Minister and President; and under Johnson, it led to at least a discussion over whether to abandon the phrase “special relationship” altogether. All prime ministers from 2002 to 2022 have had their actions filtered through the Blair Poodle myth. It has shaped how we understand their actions and how they have acted, a fact lost in positivist research. Much like Churchill in the symbolic form of a Bulldog has had a long-lasting and diverse impact on the UK’s political landscape, so has Blair the Poodle.

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