US Foreign Wars, Mass Marketing, and the Development of Post-Truth Politics

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Since 2016, when the Oxford English Dictionary selected post-truth as its Word of the Year, it has become commonplace to assert that we have entered an era of post-truth politics. In this chapter, I argue that, although the term post-truth may be relatively new, the social and political culture that the term denotes – a culture in which public opinion is not shaped by fact-based arguments so much as by reality-creating chanting of talking points – has been evolving for at least a century, if not longer. What may be new about the present is not that we have entered a new era characterised by the repeated assertion of talking points so much as that post-truth has itself become one of the talking points that saturate our discourse. Furthermore, I argue that the evolution of this post-factual culture has been pivotally shaped by the domestic politics of US foreign wars, most notably the campaigns to sell to the American public the US interventions in Europe in 1917 and Iraq in 2003.

I first sketch the propaganda campaign orchestrated by the Wilson Administration in 1917–1918 to rally support for the war effort. Public chanting of anti-German talking points was an integral part of the campaign. I then discuss how wartime propaganda methods were later transplanted to the realm of mass marketing. Commercial and political advertising campaigns have come to consist not in communicating facts about products or political candidates so much as in constant repetition of logos and taglines. When such campaigns succeed, they perform speech acts, that is, their taglines become the product (or candidate) they ostensibly refer to. Finally, I explain how such marketing practices returned with a vengeance to the foreign policy sphere in the Bush administration's campaign to mobilise public support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The campaign's central tagline was Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction'. This ambiguous phrase – chanted by the administration and echoed by a chorus of journalists, commentators, and the public at large – became the Iraqi threat it ostensibly referred to.

First World War propaganda and the birth of post-truth culture

If there is a historical moment that can be plausibly said to mark the birth of post-truth culture, it was the moment in which – a century before post-truth would become Word of the Year – the United States, led by President Woodrow Wilson, swung from neutrality to all-out intervention in the First World War. In November 1916 Wilson was re-elected on the strength of a campaign whose primary mantra was 'He Kept Us Out of the War' (Kennedy 2004, 12). But just a few months later, the very man who 'owed his victory' to this slogan, reversed his policy of neutrality 180 degrees (Kennedy 2004, 12). In a famous address on 2 April 1917, Wilson implored the US Congress to declare war on Germany, intoning another memorable talking point: 'The World Must Be Made Safe for Democracy' (Kennedy 2004, 42).

Wilson was understandably worried that the American people would not rally behind the war effort. After all, the cause of neutrality was highly popular, or else he might not have won re-election by intoning that he kept America out of the war. Moreover, millions of Americans – including ethnic Germans, Irish, and Jews – sympathised with the German side and/or harboured intense antipathy toward Britain and Russia, America's newfound allies. Against this

backdrop, and in the absence of a clear and present danger to the US homeland, 'the Wilson administration was compelled to cultivate – even to manufacture – public opinion favourable to the war effort' (Kennedy 2004, 46)

The administration thus launched a massive propaganda campaign – led by a new federal agency called the Committee on Public Information (CPI) – to sell the war to the American people. The CPI used newspapers, magazines, posters, radio, and movies to spark patriotic emotions and drum up enthusiasm for the war. Additionally, the CPI sponsored and trained 75,000 'Four-Minute Men' who made millions of short speeches around the country in support of the war effort. These speakers did not make rational arguments that appealed to the intellect of their listeners – it is virtually impossible to present a persuasive argument supported by detailed evidence in four minutes. What the speakers rather did was to repeatedly chant talking points and key phrases. For example, repeating the terms 'democracy' and 'liberty' in association with the United States while repeating words like 'beast' and 'atrocity' in association with the German enemy. As historian David Kennedy wrote, by early 1918 the CPI-guided short speeches became evocative of the 'Two Minutes Hate' exercises that George Orwell would describe in his novel *1984*. The CPI 'urged participatory "Four-Minute singing" to keep patriotism at "white heat"' (Kennedy 2004, 62).

From selling war to selling products and political candidates

The propaganda campaign orchestrated by the Wilson administration succeeded in generating public enthusiasm for the war effort. This gave some participants in the campaign the idea that the same techniques that proved so effective in selling the war to the American people could be used profitably to sell consumer products. Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud and a CPI propaganda operative, became convinced that 'if this could be used for war, it can be used for peace' (Rifkin 1991). Bernays enjoyed a long and successful career as one of America's leading experts in advertising, marketing, and public relations. He is often called the 'father of public relations' (Rifkin 1991).

The successful selling of US military intervention in Europe to a public that previously supported non-intervention was a pivotal event that ushered in the age of mass marketing, an age in which sellers of products were no longer content with providing facts about their products. In the mass consumer society that gradually took shape in the decades after World War I, the marketplace became characterised less by selling goods than by the aggressive marketing of brands, less by providing fact-based arguments about a product than by fostering emotional identification with values symbolised by brand names and icons/logos. For example, purchasers of Nike trainers do not only buy dependable athletic shoes, they also buy into values such as determination, dynamism, and cool (Johnson 2012, 3). Arguably the principal characteristic of modern mass marketing campaigns – a characteristic 'so obvious' that its significance is 'sometimes neglected' (Cook 1992, 227) – is repetition. Repetition, repetition, repetition.

Advertisers bombard us with symbols such as brand logos (the Nike swoosh), icons (Marlboro Man; Mr. Clean), and taglines ('Just do it'; 'Intel Inside'). These are repeated over and over with the aim that they would become etched in our minds like earworms – catchy tunes that involuntarily and repetitively play in our heads. As the political and corporate consultant Frank Luntz explained in his book *Words that Work*, the marketing messages that become stuck in our heads are typically brief and simple. Effective advertisers do not use a sentence when a phrase will do, and they use abbreviations whenever possible: 'the most unforgettable catchphrases … contain only

single- or at the most two-syllable words. And when they initially haven't been so simple, someone has stepped in to shorten them'. Thus, the Macintosh computer became Mac. Similarly, Federal Express, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and British Petroleum abbreviated their official names to FedEx, KFC, and BP (Luntz 2007, 6–7). The point is not that marketing campaigns never misfire – the history of advertising is rife with failures. But of those campaigns that succeed, perhaps their most remarkable feature is that the verbal and visual symbols spouted by the marketers unite with the brand being marketed. As Luntz put it, 'The most successful taglines are not seen as slogans for a product. They *are* the product' (Luntz 2007, 98; emphasis original). Similarly, enduring corporate icons such as the Marlboro Man and the Energizer Bunny 'aren't shills trying to *talk* us into buying' a pack of cigarettes or a package of batteries. 'Just like the most celebrated slogans, they *are* the products' (Luntz 2007, 100; emphases original). Although Luntz is a practical man, not a philosopher, his argument can readily be translated into the idiom of the philosophy of language. Luntz basically says that the verbal symbols repeatedly uttered by advertisers sometimes perform

successful *illocutionary speech acts* (Austin and Urmson 2009). In other words, these phrases become the things they ostensibly refer to. They create reality rather than merely describe a pre-existing factual reality.

As mass marketing and advertising techniques became ubiquitous in the commercial marketplace, they increasingly migrated to other social spheres. As French philosopher Francois Baudrillard wrote in 1981, 'All current modes of activity tend toward … the *form* of advertising, that of a simplified operational mode, vaguely seductive, vaguely consensual' (Baudrillard 1994, 87; emphasis original). Baudrillard further observed that politics absorbed the operational mode of advertising more fully than other spheres. In contemporary society, 'there is no longer any difference between the economic and the political, because the same language reigns in both' (Baudrillard 1994, 88). Returning now from the French philosopher to the American practitioner, Luntz wrote almost as if Baudrillard were guiding his hand: 'It's hard to tell who is in greater demand today: the Madison Avenue branding experts who are brought in to teach political parties how to define themselves, or the political consultants brought into corporate boardrooms to teach businesses how to communicate more effectively'. Madison Avenue techniques, Luntz added, 'firmly took hold in Washington during the Reagan years – and they continue to drive our politics today' (Luntz 2007, 72).

Luntz may have been too cautious in dating the marriage of Madison Avenue and Washington to the Reagan years. In fact, as US presidency scholar Samuel Popkin noted, 'Working to develop a brand name … has always been part and parcel of preparing for a run at higher offices' (Popkin 2012, 23). And since at least 1952, when an infectious tagline written by a marketing executive – 'I like Ike' – powered Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency (Peterson 2009, 66), the branding strategies of US presidential candidates have prominently included the spouting forth of catchphrases: 'It's morning again in America' (Reagan, 1984); 'It's the economy, stupid' (Clinton, 1992); 'Yes, we can!' (Obama, 2008); 'Make America great again' (Trump, 2016). Indeed, inasmuch as his last name was a recognisable brand long before Donald Trump entered politics, his 2016 presidential campaign took the unification of name and product (political candidate) to a new level.

To recapitulate my argument so far, a central feature of post-truth culture – the repetition of talking points that do not merely describe a factual reality but create reality – has been part of American social, economic, and political life for many decades. The shaping of reality through repetitive spouting of words and symbols is not confined to domestic affairs. In fact, the origins of what is now called 'post-truth politics' go back to the campaign to sell America's intervention in World War I to the American people.

Back to selling war, in Iraq: WMD, WMD, WMD

In the remainder of this chapter, drawing on Oren and Solomon (2013; 2015), I return to US foreign relations and focus on a more recent case in which a government-orchestrated propaganda campaign successfully drummed-up enthusiasm for a war. I consciously use 'drum-up' because this campaign was metaphorically tantamount to the rhythmic beating of war drums. The campaign succeeded not by providing the American people with a fact-based argument about a foreign threat, which the public in turn considered rationally and found persuasive. It rather succeeded by continually repeating a catchphrase (or talking point) and by virtue of the incessant repetition of the catchphrase by the media and the public at large, which created a metaphorical drumbeat, or a choral chant: weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction, WMD, WMD, WMD. The choral incantation of the phrase performed an illocutionary speech act, that is, it did not merely describe a threat so much as it created and shaped a reality of a grave, existential danger.

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, even though the mastermind of the attacks was based in Afghanistan, the George W. Bush administration began depicting Iraq as a grave menace to US and world security. During the run-up to the March 2003 invasion, the central theme of the administration's case against Iraq was the danger of Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction'. Beginning with the January 2002 State of the Union address, Bush and senior administration officials uttered this phrase multiple times in most of their public appearances.

In August 2002 the White House was put on the defensive by a growing opposition galvanised by an opinion article in the *Wall Street Journal.* Titled 'Don't Bomb Saddam', the article was authored by former National Security Advisor

Brent Scowcroft, a confidante of the president's father. To regain momentum, the White House Chief of Staff, Andrew Card, convened a high- level group whose mission was to market a war in Iraq. Although the formation of this group – the White House Iraq Group (WHIG) – was not made public, Card hinted at its task on 6 September 2002, when he told the *New York Times* that 'From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August'. Among the members of the WHIG were several specialists in strategic communication, including the president's senior political advisor, Karl Rove. In candid comments quoted by *New York Times* writer Ron Suskind in late 2004, Rove said that that journalists like Suskind lived 'in what we call the reality-based community', which Rove defined as 'people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality"'. Rove added that the world does not work like this anymore:

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do (Suskind 2004).

Whether or not he ever studied the philosophy of language, Rove's comment sounded like he had a solid grasp of the concept of speech act.

The WHIG coordinated a dramatic public relations offensive to sell the war to the American public. With the launching of this campaign, the use of the talking point 'weapons of mass destruction' by administration officials increased markedly. In an appearance on CNN on the campaign's first day – 8 September 2002 – National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice uttered the phrase 13 times. In a televised prime-time speech in Cincinnati a month later, Bush alluded to 'weapons of mass destruction' eight times in 26 minutes. On 3 January 2003, speaking to troops in Fort Hood, Texas, Bush said:

The Iraqi regime has used weapons of mass destruction. They not only had weapons of mass destruction, they used weapons of mass destruction. They used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people. That's why I say Iraq is a threat, a real threat.

The persistent repetition of the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' was, therefore, a central aspect of the Bush administration's campaign to sell the Iraq war to the American people. Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, the only Republican senator who opposed the war, was hardly exaggerating when he later complained that the administration's case for invading Iraq consisted in a 'steady drumbeat of weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction, weapons of mass destruction'.

To become unified with the threat that it ostensibly referred to, it was not enough for the phrase to be repeated by the administration. To effectively create a menacing reality, this phrase had to be accepted and adopted by its audience – the media and the public at large. And indeed, before too long, 'weapons of mass destruction' became a daily staple of the American press. As Figure 4.1 shows, the frequency with which the *Wall Street Journal* printed this phrase was virtually zero in the 1980s and moderate in the 1990s before spiking dramatically in 2002 and 2003. A similar pattern was characteristic of other leading newspapers. And, as illustrated by figure 4.2, during the twelve months preceding the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 the incidence of 'weapons of mass destruction' in leading US publications has increased almost tenfold. Much of this increase coincided with the launching of the government's marketing campaign in early September 2002. No sooner than it flooded the US media, the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' invaded the everyday talk of ordinary Americans at work, at home, and so on. This linguistic invasion was evidenced by the fact that the American Dialect Society selected the phrase as its 2002 'Word of the Year', that is, the year's most 'newly prominent or notable' vocabulary item.

As noted earlier, in commercial marketing, some of the most memorable brand names are abbreviations: CNN; KFC, FedEx. And, just as these corporations have profited from the abridgment of their names, so has the marketing of the Iraq war benefitted from the abbreviation of the flabby 'weapons of mass destruction' into a trim acronym, WMD. Whereas the acronym WMD almost never appeared in America's major newspapers in the 1990s, during the lead-up to the Iraq War the same newspapers printed this abbreviation hundreds of times. As the war approached, the acronym became so commonplace that reporters and commentators no longer felt compelled to spell it out (that is,

they increasingly referred to WMD in the same manner that they routinely refer to, say, CNN without spelling out Cable News Network). The drumbeat echoed by the media became peppier: WMD, WMD, WMD.

In an insightful 'note on abridgment', Marcuse wrote that, even as abbreviations perform a perfectly reasonable function of simplifying speech – it is simpler to say NATO than North Atlantic Treaty Organization – they also perform an inconspicuous rhetorical function: 'help[ing] to repress undesired questions'. For example,

NATO does not suggest what North Atlantic Treaty Organization says, namely a treaty among the nations on the North Atlantic – in which case one might ask questions about the membership of Greece and Turkey (Marcuse 1991, 94).

In keeping with Marcuse's analysis, the popularisation of WMD helped 'repress undesired questions' surrounding administration statements such as (in President Bush's words) 'They used weapons of mass destruction in other countries, they have used weapons of mass destruction on their own people'. Because WMD elides the words 'mass destruction', the growing prominence of the abbreviation in public discourse made it less likely that people would stop their chanting to ask questions like: can poison gas – the weapon that the above statement interchanged 'weapons of mass destruction' for – truly cause 'mass destruction' even as gas cannot destroy property? Did the gas the Iraqi regime use against 'its own people' really cause 'mass destruction'? Could the employment of chemical weapons by Iraq truly pose a grave danger to the security of the United States? In sum, the incantation of abbreviations like WMD perform the rhetorical function of taking us even further away from concrete factual reality than the chanting of the full phrase.

Abbreviation aside, some readers may wonder: Isn't 'weapons of mass destruction' a clear and unproblematic reference to alleged 'facts on the ground' in Iraq? Can't we simply check the facts and determine whether it was true that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction? Indeed, this was precisely how the US public debate was framed in the war's aftermath: did Iraq truly possess these weapons? If not, did the Bush administration lie to the American people (and the world) or merely suffer an unintentional intelligence failure? But I want to suggest that checking facts about weapons of mass destruction is not so simple because, like other common terms in US foreign policy discourse, this phrase is ambiguous and has multiple meanings. What exactly is meant by rogue state? Axis of evil? Ethnic cleansing? Soft/smart power? The meaning of such terms, like that of 'weapons of mass destruction', is more equivocal and historically variable than one might think. They are, in other words, empty signifiers.

When the term 'weapons of mass destruction' first appeared in diplomatic documents and in the US press in November 1945, it had no clear definition. In subsequent arms control negotiations held at the United Nations, diplomats and commentators debated a wide range of definitions before the UN Commission on Conventional Armament resolved in 1948 that 'weapons of mass destruction' included atomic, radiological, biological, and chemical weapons, as well as future weapons capable of comparable destruction. During the Cold War, however, the phrase receded from public view and, on the rare occasions it was mentioned in the US press, it was typically associated with nuclear weapons alone. The phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' was entirely absent from media reporting on instances in which chemical agents were undoubtedly used in warfare, including the widespread use of riot control agents and herbicides by the United States in Vietnam. Nor was the phrase mentioned in US press reporting on the use of poison gas by the Egyptian air force in Yemen, which resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths. Most strikingly, in contrast with President Bush's statement in 2003 that 'The Iraqi regime has used weapons of mass destruction', this term was utterly omitted from US press reporting in the 1980s on Iraq's lethal chemical warfare against Iran and against its own Kurdish population.

In the 1990s, 'weapons of mass destruction' made a minor comeback into US foreign policy discourse because the phrase was incorporated into the 1991 UN Security Council resolution that set the terms of the Gulf War ceasefire and imposed an arms inspection regime on Iraq. At the same time, the phrase jumped from the realm of foreign relations to the text of a massive anticrime law passed by the US Congress. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 defined weapons of mass destruction in far broader terms than those of the UN's 1948 definition, including, for example, any conventional 'bomb, grenade, rocket having a propellant charge of more than four ounces'. Based on this legislation, federal prosecutors began pressing WMD charges regularly not only against

terrorism suspects such as 'shoe bomber' Richard Reid but also in cases involving petty domestic crime. For instance, a short time after the US invaded Iraq to remove the existential threat of WMD, a man from Pennsylvania was sent to prison for mailing his former doctor a 'weapon of mass destruction' assembled from 'black gunpowder, a carbon dioxide cartridge, a nine-volt battery … and dental floss'.

'Weapons of mass destruction', then, is an ambiguous figure of speech, an empty signifier. Throughout its history the meaning of the phrase has been contested and changeable. It has had multiple meanings and it has meant different things to different people. Furthermore, even if foreign policy experts may have had a clear idea in their minds of what the term meant, the fact remains that before the Bush administration started intoning this term in 2002, most Americans have either never heard it or, if they have, they did not share a clear concept of what it precisely meant.

Here, I want to make an important point. As older readers may recall, the Iraq War was a divisive issue in American politics and a sizable minority of Americans adamantly opposed the invasion. Yet the chanting of WMD, WMD, WMD, transcended the political divide because opponents of the war, too, embraced the term, repeating it reflexively and uncritically. For example, speaking on the same CNN program in which Condoleezza Rice kicked off the campaign to sell the Iraq war to the American people, Senator Bob Graham – a Democrat from Florida who would later vote against authorising the war – uttered 'weapons of mass destruction' seven times.

By joining the chorus chanting 'WMD', the opponents of the war helped consolidate a generalised atmosphere of danger even as they were not persuaded by the Bush administration's case for war. When Americans were asked by pollsters whether they supported or opposed the use of force against Iraq, the results were exceptionally stable over time. In survey after survey conducted throughout 2002 and early 2003, just under sixty percent of the respondents expressed support for an invasion while just over a third of them indicated opposition. Remarkably, the launching of the administration's war marketing campaign in September 2002 made virtually no dent in this pattern. There is little evidence, then, that the administration persuaded the American people to change their minds about the Iraqi threat. The invasion of Iraq was sold to the American people not by making them think together so much as by making both proponents and opponents of the war move their lips together: WMD, WMD, WMD. The collective chanting of this phrase in the mass media echoed and scaled up the participatory patriotic singing conducted in 1917–1918 by 'Four-Minute Men' in public squares across the country.

Readers familiar with contemporary International Relations scholarship may have noticed that my argument dovetails with two theoretical innovations that have gained resonance in the discipline in recent decades. First, my claim that the chanting of 'weapons of mass destruction' performed a speech act evokes the concept of securitisation (Wæver 1995) which theorises that national security threats do not exist prior to language; rather, an issue becomes a threat by being named as such. More specifically, an issue becomes successfully 'securitised' when state officials pronounce it a security threat and when an 'audience' accepts the officials' pronouncement. The case of Iraq's securitisation in 2003, that is, the successful elevation of the Iraqi issue to the level of a grave menace to US national security, suggests that proclaiming an object a security threat may take the form of 'repeated assertion of talking points'. Moreover, this case suggests that the audience's acceptance consists not only in being persuaded by securitising talk but also, importantly, in actively participating in the performance of the talking points. Second, my analysis of the selling of the Iraq War to the American public dovetails with the 'practice turn' in International Relations theory (Adler and Pouliot 2011).

The underlying intuition of the practice turn is that 'social realities – and international politics – are constituted by human beings acting in and on the world' (Cournot, n.d.). Human beings, in other words, form their beliefs and knowledge about the world through routine performance of material practices. Informed by this perspective, critics of Wæver's theorisation argued that objects/issues become securitised not through speech so much as through routinised performance of material practices 'such as programming algorithms, routine collection of data, and looking at CCTV footage' (Huysmans 2011, 372). My analysis suggests that securitisation performed in speech and securitisation performed in material practice are not mutually exclusive. The social reality of Iraq as being an existential security threat was shaped at once by the repetitive uttering of the words and by the material acts of lips moving and fingers tapping on keyboards together: WMD, WMD, WMD.

I conclude this section by quoting from a magazine column published shortly after the invasion of Iraq. At the time, a noisy and acrimonious debate was taking place on whether Iraq truly possessed weapons of mass destruction and, if it didn't, whether the claims of the administration were a lie or merely the product of an unintentional intelligence failure. Amid the din of the debate, Michael Kinsley was the only voice who recognised WMD for the securitising speech act that it was (even if he did not use this term).

By now, WMD have taken on a mythic role in which fact doesn't play much of a part. The phrase itself – 'weapons of mass destruction' – is more like an incantation than a description of anything in particular. The term is a new one to almost everybody, and the concern it officially embodies was on almost no one's radar screen until recently. Unofficially, 'weapons of mass destruction' are to George W. Bush what fairies were to Peter Pan. He wants us to say, 'We DO believe in weapons of mass destruction. We DO believe. We DO'. If we all believe hard enough, they will be there. And it's working (Kinsley 2003).

With Kinsley, I argue that the incessant incantation of 'weapons of mass destruction' by the Bush administration, and the ricocheting of the phrase through the echo chamber of the mass media, emptied it of any specific meaning. Just as the repetition of liturgical texts serves to divert the worshipper's mind from his worldly situation and to affirm the axioms of his belief, so did the incantation of 'WMD' make Americans take the existence of these weapons as an article of faith, distracting the American mind from the realities of the Middle East. Moreover, just as the chanting of a mantra lifts the chanter above material reality and promotes the actualisation of the idea being uttered, so did the collective chant 'weapons of mass destruction' rhetorically create the Iraqi threat as much as it referred to such a threat.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I called attention to a central element of post-truth culture: the displacement of reality-based arguments by reality-shaping repetition of talking points, taglines, and catchphrases. I argued that the birth of this culture may be traced back to the propaganda campaign launched by the Wilson administration in 1917 to rally the US public behind the US intervention in the Great War. Following the campaign's success, the propaganda methods it employed – including, prominently, the repetitive spouting of catchphrases – were perfected in commercial marketing and political campaigning only to be reapplied to the marketing of foreign wars. The Bush Administration's 2002–2003 campaign to sell the Iraq War to the US public through repeating the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' echoed and outperformed the anti-German chants of the Wilson Administration's 'Four-Minute Men'. The choral chanting of WMD, WMD, WMD by the Bush administration, the media, and the public had little to do with communicating objective facts about an Iraqi threat. Instead, the chorus successfully securitised Iraq, singing the threat into existence.

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