

“Fake News”: Propaganda, Disinformation, or Contemporary Legend?

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This essay draft is being circulated prior to discussion at the forum "Fake News 4: The Politics of Knowledge in a Crisis of Trust" at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Minneapolis, October 19th, 2017. Please do not quote or cite without permission from the author.

In 1989, for an AFS panel on "Contemporary Legends in Emergence," I proposed that "Those who tell a legend have a goal in doing so; likewise, audiences have implicit expectations they want fulfilled. Legend-telling thus embodies a complex social event, in which the performer . . . also gains (or fails to gain) social control over an ambiguous situation. The . . . most popular legends have the potential to transform social structures for better or worse. Hence legend-telling is often a fundamentally political act." (1990:2). Later, in April 2003, I participated in a Rockefeller Foundation conference on the "Social impact of Rumor and Legend," at Lake Como, while the papers were full of the news of the United States' unfolding invasion and occupation of Iraq. Hugh Price, the recently retired leader of the National Urban League and now a Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institute, sat in on one of the sessions, then rose at the end to comment, "I understand now ... the 'weapons of mass destruction' were the contemporary legend."

Perhaps this remark was naïve. The rationale for the American pre-emptive attack on Iraq was the conviction among policy-makers in the Bush Administration that Iraqi scientists, on orders from Saddam Hussein, were developing biological and chemical weapons, and probably also nuclear weapons. These could be used on its neighbors and potentially against the United States also through Islamic terrorist networks. Hard evidence of such weapons was lacking at that time, but in his State of the Union Address that year, President George W. Bush. President Bush imagined a replay of the September 11 attacks, warning Americans that "It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known." He vowed that as leader of the country, he would make sure such a day would never come, adding, "Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent." But Bush dismissed this option, adding, "Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike? If this threat is permitted to fully and suddenly emerge, all actions, all words and all recriminations would come too late. Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option" (Bush 2003). The WMD claim had achieved overwhelming legislative support for the effort as well as limited support from the United Nations.

So scholars wince when a term like "legend" or "myth" is used in a disparaging way to suggest that a given claim is believed only by the ignorant, while sensible people like us know it just ain't so. Folklorists therefore try to separate the matter of "truth" or even "belief" from our understanding of "contemporary legendry" as meaning-making with a certain social function. Veronique Champion-Vincent (2005) has dealt with the politically controversy over whether

third-world children are being abducted and butchered for their internal organs in transplants. She found considerable evidence that organ trafficking has occurred and continues to occur, along with widespread kidnapping and trafficking in children. The most widespread legends, involving mysterious white vans and children's corpses found stuffed with American paper currency, cannot be traced to any factual event, but their active circulation is based on a widespread knowledge and fear of genuine exploitation by unscrupulous personnel from the industrialized world.

Yes, the WMD, famously, did not exist, but does that make George W. Bush a "legend performer"? On the other hand, is a claim made by government officials claiming access to sensitive intelligence always *more* than a "legend" because it was set in action by educated, professional people. The existing terminological resonances of "legendry," I suggested (1991), were limiting our perspectives to examples of marginal or trivial social importance. If legendry can be "a fundamentally political act," then choosing to apply our theoretical perspective to a timely and controversial social debate is likewise a political act. As is our refusal to do so and our subsequent silence (2001:243).

My collaboration with sociologist Gary Alan Fine brought this issue into sharper focus for me. Our book, *The Global Grapevine* (2010) dealt with many issues that have been at the center of political debate, both in the United States and across the industrialized world. Nevertheless, my senior partner considered, the term "rumor" or "legend" was appropriate only when discussing how ordinary individuals discuss and pass on truth claims for which they do not have secure standards of evidence. Such claims are part of "unofficial communication" in everyday life that could, for all the teller knows, be true or false, leading to the characteristic polemic slant of such narratives. On the other hand, Fine considered, in an early draft of the book, "Those who have the authority to know – governments, for example, or those who participated in or planned the events themselves – do not communicate rumor, because their information is based upon official knowledge. . . . The claims might be accurate, mistaken, lies, or propaganda, but these men are in a position to know. These statements are not unsecured information."

In other words, this position holds, when politicians engage in fundamentally political acts, their actions fall into a different narrative mode from legendry, because they know, or at least have means to know, the truth. Common folk, on the other hand, do not have access to official knowledge, and so their narratives necessary are legends, or relatively uninformed efforts to understand a truth that only educated, professionally-trained people can truly understand. As junior author I questioned this distinction, pointing out that the main conduits of satanic cult lore were trained law enforcement officers and psychologists. The final text of the book was much revised on this point. Still it continues to insist, as per my senior author, that "official sources . . . spread *disinformation*" rather than legends and that "scholars do not consider [government officials'] statements to be rumor, only *propaganda*" (2010:8, emphasis mine).

The theoretical problem here is the presumption that government officials *know the truth* (or at least have access to it), while common people are ignorant and lack learning. Perhaps (as many folklorists have assumed about "the folk") they are simple-minded. By contrast, government officials can readily sort out truth from fallacy, and so when they circulate untruths, they do so knowing that they are lying to manipulate a gullible public. Thus *rumor* or *legend* signals lack of knowledge and implies lack of intelligence, while *disinformation* and *propaganda* signals conscious intent to deceive and implies cleverness. This distinction,

however, displays the same sloppy thinking that folklorists have debunked when reporters assume that "urban legends" are untrue and passed on only by ignorant people. In the wake of recent political events in the United States, it becomes less tenable to assume that influential claims made by politicians are made on the basis of secure standards of evidence, and that false claims are cunning, self-aware lies intended to mislead millions of naïve followers.

This is no new insight. The first documented academic use and discussion of the related term "urban myth," occurred at an interdisciplinary conference concerning the political situation at the end of British colonial rule, held at Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1960 (see Ellis 2007). William L. Friedland, later a distinguished sociologist, introduced the term, characterizing it with a familiar trait: the narrator often claims "that he had the story from a friend who got the story from another friend to whom the event is actually supposed to have happened." (1960:86). But Friedland was foresightful enough to avoid the problems caused by defining the concept in terms of literal truth, stating, "myth is not being used here in the sense of a 'false belief' but as *a set of ideas which can be utilized as a basis for action*" (85n, my emphasis). By myth, Friedland meant what folklorists now call legend, a proposition that may or may not be true, but which helps people interpret events during times of uncertainty. Such legends maintain traditional values, but, as Friedland warned in 1960, they are apt to put colonial officials dangerously out of touch with political realities at precisely the times when clear sight is crucial. In short, neither the factual status of the claim nor the class or social status of those who entertain the claim should be part of our working definition of a myth, or as we folklorists prefer to say, of a legend. That, properly, is (as I've argued) not a particular type of story but an activity, a communal exploration of social boundaries (Ellis 2001: 11)

The underlying terminological issue was shrewdly identified by Professor W. F. H. Nicolaisen during the formative days of the "Contemporary Legend" seminars in the 1980s. At the third of such seminars, in the summer of 1985, he presented a prescient analysis of the confusion that had developed when English-speaking and German-speaking scholars tried to develop a common understanding of the narrative genre of legend. The English term "legend" implied a narrative structure of a certain kind (with lingering resonances from its use to identify edifying incidents in a saint's career that Christians "ought to read" (*legenda est*). By contrast, the German term "Sage" resonated with concepts of fluid, unpredictable oral discourse --things people "say" (*Was ich sage*). As Nicolaisen put it, the German term "implies formlessness or multiformity in its relentless reference to the spoken word," while the English word "takes linguistic structure for granted" (1988:85). Because these two words "are not exact equivalents in the two languages to which they belong," they "do not, in all instances, function as translations of each other" (1988:85). So when the two bodies of scholarship collided, the result was confusion, some scholars emphasizing the improvisational qualities of narration, while others looking for plot structures that reflected the statements' didactic function.

In Bill Nicolaisen's honor, I'll review three claims made by American politicians: President George H. W. Bush's use of the "Looted Incubators" to justify the 1990 Desert Storm operation, his son George W. Bush's use of the "Weapons of Mass Destruction" to defend the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Candidate Donald Trump's use of "The Celebrating Arabs" to promote an anti-Islamic agenda in the 2016 election. None of these officials intended their claims as disinformation or propaganda. Yes, they justified political actions with these claims: but it should not be surprising that politicians used a fundamentally political act with political

motivations. All three claims, as Hugh Price intuited, are contemporary legends and we should study them as such.

1991: Looted Incubators and Desert Storm

Because all three claims deal with the United States' contentious involvement with the Middle East, it becomes necessary to stand back and see, from a historical point of view, just how it became such a major part of this country's foreign affairs. Iraq was, like Kuwait, originally one part of the larger Ottoman Empire, which supported the losing side in World War I and as a result was subdivided into separate nations under the supervision of Great Britain. Until 1923, in fact, the areas that became Iraq and Kuwait were administered by the British as part of their Mesopotamian protectorate. In the 1920s three distinct provinces, with different ethnic and religious identities were combined into the new sovereign nation of Iraq, while Great Britain maintained possession of Kuwait. The British Empire maintained a presence in the area, even briefly reoccupying Iraq during World War II, until it withdrew, granting Kuwait independence in 1961, over the objections of the Iraqis who expected to annex this area. Nevertheless, the area remained relatively quiet until a series of uprisings led to the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq's neighbor Iran. Further unrest led to a further deterioration of relations between Iran and the US, climaxing in the embarrassing hostage crisis of 1980-81.

Hence when the secular general Saddam Hussein, who had come to power as part of a bloody coup in 1979, provoked a border war with Iran in 1980, he received considerable support from the United States as an potentially Western-leaning ally in the region. However, the Iraq-Iran war turned into a messy quagmire, in which Iran gained control over much of the valuable oil fields in the Basra region and made such strong inroads that many feared that their troops would be able to overrun Kuwait and even nearby parts of Saudi Arabia. Hence the Reagan Administration, including General Colin Powell, then National Security Advisor, provided considerable assistance to the Iraqi, including covert military aid and battlefield tactical advice from American intelligence officers. Donald Rumsfeld, then a special administration envoy to the Middle East, was instrumental in providing and coordinating this aid to the Hussein regime. As a result, the Iraqi forces were able to recapture many of the lost oil fields.

The war was concluded in 1988 at considerable human and financial cost to Iraq. These debts, then, led Saddam Hussein into a dispute with Kuwait, which had originally agreed to underwrite part of the war expenses to ensure their own safety from the Iranians. After the war, the Kuwaitis reneged. Escalating disputes, including the allegation that Kuwait was slant-drilling across the border into Iraq's crude oil fields, led in August 1990, to a surprise invasion of the country. The Kuwaiti Royal Family then turned to its Western customers for help in reclaiming their country.

Hussein had been, up to this point, an American ally and a dependable source of petroleum, and the border dispute with Kuwait did not involve any strategic problem to the West. "If and when a shooting war starts, reporters will begin to wonder why American soldiers are dying for oil-rich sheiks," an Army official cautioned in the journal *Public Relations Quarterly*. To build political support for a Western-led counterattack on Iraq, the Kuwaitis retained the American public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, which conducted a series of opinion polls. In fall 1990, the firm determined that the most effective message supporting military intervention was "that Saddam Hussein was a madman who had committed atrocities even against his own people,

and had tremendous power to do further damage, and he needed to be stopped" (qtd in Stauber and Rampton 1995). There was some truth to this message: but Hussein's politics seemed no more brutal than those seen in other West-friendly dictatorships, and advisors felt his aggression could be contained by diplomatic measures. Hence the case for military intervention to liberate Kuwait was not at first persuasive.

Hill and Knowlton cannot be proved to have *originated* much of the Desert Storm folklore that emerged, for atrocity stories are a normal part of wartime (Bennett and Smith 2007:68-70, Brunvand 2012). But the firm was aware that they carried social power, and when horror stories linked to the Iraqi occupation began to circulate, staffers fed variants to newspapers and media sources, often in the form of video news releases produced in their own studios. The most important of these horror stories was the allegation that when Iraqi soldiers entered Kuwait, they entered a hospital's maternity ward, removed over 300 premature babies from incubators, left them to die on the floors, and shipped the medical equipment back to Baghdad. This story seems to have first appeared in Great Britain's *Daily Telegraph* on September 5, 1990, giving an unidentified exiled Kuwaiti minister as the authority. An American traveler soon after related another version to a reporter, simply saying she had heard that such an event had happened (Regan 2002). As the story began to circulate, Hill & Knowlton saw an opportunity to use it as part of their PR program.

On October 10, 1990, a hearing was scheduled in the US House of Representatives before a group that was titled the Congressional Human Rights Caucus.¹ At its climax, a young girl, identified only as Nayirah, testified that she had been at the Kuwaiti hospital in question and had personally witnessed the atrocity. "I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns," she told the assemblage, "and go into the room where 15 babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the babies on the cold floor to die." This event was an elaborate bit of ostension, stage-managed by Hill & Knowlton. Nayirah, the alleged eyewitness, was the well-coached daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador. The PR firm distributed footage from the event to newsrooms, and the event was widely reported in sources, such as the January 1991 *Amnesty International Report*, which reported without qualification that "Eye-witnesses reported that premature babies died after they were removed from incubators by Iraqi soldiers" (124).

The senior George H. W. Bush, by all accounts was profoundly disturbed by this and similar atrocity stories being circulated by proponents of the invasion. He repeatedly referenced the incubator story, along with other atrocities, in speeches and private conversations (Cohen 2002). Political scientist Stephen J. Wayne credits the atrocity stories with driving President Bush to an emotional crisis in which he became convinced that Saddam Hussein was the embodiment of evil capable of causing untold suffering unless the United States ensured that "the right must prevail." (1993:41-42). In a Public Television interview conducted by David Frost, the President specifically referenced the report, commenting, Oh, David ... it was so terrible, it's hard to describe." Referencing a number of the atrocity stories, he broke off, saying, "I mean, it -- it is primeval. And I -- I'm afraid I'd get very emotional if I described more of it." He summed up his sense of the situation to Frost: "When you have such a clear case of good and -- good versus evil. We have such a clear moral case. . . . It's that big. It's that important" (qtd in Woodward 1991: 343-44). When his spiritual advisor, Episcopalian bishop Edmond Browning, counseled him to handle the crisis without bloodshed, he simply

responded, "You should read the Amnesty International Report. Then you tell me what I should do" (Path to War 1991).

One could say President Bush was manipulated by disinformation. But there was nothing contrived in the President's reaction: he responded to it just like other ordinary people and in an action-oriented way typical of legends describing evil others poised to cause harm to our world. Of course, being the US President, his reaction had more than ordinary consequences.

2003: Weapons of Mass Destruction

Desert Storm restored Kuwait's sovereignty but left the "madman" Saddam in power. When his son, George W. Bush, took office in 2001, a cadre of advisors convinced him to finish the job. Iraqi forces had used chemical warfare in the past, and though they had allegedly destroyed their stockpiles, suspicions lingered that secret arsenals remained. Moreover, many agents feared that the military was developing a small-scale nuclear weapon. The evil, unpredictable Saddam could share these weapons with Islamic terrorists for a replay of the 9/11 attacks. So the 2003 invasion was cast as a preemptive attack to neutralize these weapons of mass destruction. The second ground for war followed logically: Saddam Hussein's unpredictable actions predisposed him to share these WMD with Islamic terrorists for a replay of the 9/11 attacks. In this case, the push for action came not from a public relations firm but from an inner circle of cabinet members in the Bush administration, informally named WHIG or the White House Iraq Group. It proved persuasive and was repeated by multiple sources in the Bush administration, as well as by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. As the story developed, the situation was an emergency, for Iraq could use its WMD at any time. The invasion itself, initiated in March 2003, quickly achieved its goals.

In the wake of the invasion, teams of American inspectors carefully sifted the evidence and found no sign of the weapons or of active programs to develop them. A senior CIA official, who reviewed intelligence estimates in the light of post-invasion documents, was surprised by the lack of results. Usually the results of checking flawed information leads to ambiguity, he found: the weapons might exist, but in fewer or less powerful forms than expected. No one expected to find so close to nothing, the official said. "Ordinarily you're never proven wrong in [such] a clean neat way" (Ricks 377). Officials involved in some way were quick to claim innocence or redirect the blame to others. The intelligence community blamed the administration for insisting that they find evidence supporting the WMD claim; the administration blamed the intelligence community for not being more cautious in their assessments. Ahmed Chalabi, who located defectors who were willing to verify the existence of the WMD, likewise claimed innocence. "The fact that I deliberately misled the U.S. government," he emphasized, "this is an urban myth" (Isikoff and Corn: 415).

Yes, discrediting the WMD claim does not make it an "urban legend" or "myth." Its effective political function is to clarify an uncertain situation and justifying a course of action. We see this function clearly in a *Meet the Press* interview of February 2004 in which President Bush was asked to answer the charge that he had led the United States to war "under false pretenses." The President's response was in line with much of what folklorists have learned about the political strategies of legendry. First Bush denied that the claim was consciously intended as disinformation. "I expected to find the weapons," he persisted. Then he cast the claim as a reasonable conclusion based on the available intelligence: he had used poison gas and had touted his nation's nuclear research. And he had funded resistance groups that used terror. "In other words, he was a dangerous man," Bush concluded. And, he continued,

absence of evidence for the weapons it did not mean that the claim was a lie, only that it, like a true legend, simply had not yet been proved true. "There's theories as to where the weapons went," the President continued. "They could be hidden. They could have been transported to another country, and we'll find out."

Then, in a way a contemporary legend scholar understands, Bush continued with a more subtle argument: the claim is not a "false pretense" or piece of disinformation because it presents a *plausible* argument. Gary Alan Fine points out that this factor contributes more to a rumor or legend's viability than its *credibility*. That is, if a claim coheres to beliefs that a culture already considers true, then it will be accepted readily even if no secured evidence exists to support it. Such stories, Fine says, are "too good to be false" (Fine and Kawaja 2003:190, Fine and Ellis 2010:5). Seen in this theoretical light, President Bush's argument makes perfect sense. Fact finders confirmed, he told the interviewer, "that Saddam had the capacity to make weapons. Saddam Hussein was dangerous with weapons. Saddam Hussein was dangerous with the ability to make weapons. He was a dangerous man in the dangerous part of the world." In other words, even if he did not at the moment of invasion have WMD, he was intrinsically the sort of irrational person who would have, in due time, created and used them against the West. "I don't think America can stand by and hope for the best from a madman," Bush concluded, adding, "and I believe it is essential--I believe it is essential--that when we see a threat, we deal with those threats before they become imminent. It's too late if they become imminent. It's too late in this new kind of war, and so that's why I made the decision I made" (qtd. in Ricks 375-76).

Investigative writer Seymour Hersh, best known for breaking the details on the torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib, judged the president harshly for such logic, commenting:

There are many who believe George Bush is a liar, a President who knowingly and deliberately twists facts for political gain. But lying would indicate an understanding of what is desired, what is possible, and how best to get there. A more plausible explanation is that words have no meaning for this President beyond the immediate moment, and so he believes that his mere utterance of the phrases makes them real (367).

Folklorists can do better: Hersh's judgment fails to consider the peculiar function and power of the contemporary legend. Even if a truth claim does not rely on factual truth, it takes on a reality of its own as a paradigm for motivated action. In the case of contemporary legends, the mere utterance of phrases, or their communication in print or images, does indeed make them real, and all parts of the resulting social process is part of legendry. My comment on the "essentially political" nature of legends was founded in my observations of small-town panics. In the 1980s, they were often caused by a rumor that devil worshipers would attend a high school prom and carry out a massacre. Police and security agents showed up in force, and nothing happened, but, as I argued, the failure of Satanists to appear at the time of the showdown did not prove that they didn't exist. Rather it demonstrated that the community's show of force convinced them to return to the shadowy world in which they exist (Ellis 2001: 217-18).

Two decades later, they were motivated by stories generated by a sudden influx of Latino immigrants, drawn to the area by a newly-opened meat-packing plant. In an account related to a reporter, the night after a local murder, which served as a triggering event for the local panic,

he could not sleep. "I laid there and stared at the ceiling," he recalled. "I literally prayed. I realized I had to do something drastic to save the city. If I just let this go and sat back, this wouldn't be a city that anyone wanted to live in. . . I felt almost hopeless at that point, watching my city being destroyed right before my eyes" (Barry 2006). In much the same way President Bush described his reaction to the process leading to the order to initiate the combat. "It was emotional to me," he told reporter Bob Woodward. "I prayed as I walked around the circle. . . . Going into this period. I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible" (Woodward 2004: 379). Both responses embody an identical response to learning of some that the community you govern is threatened by some shadowy, unpredictable threat, i.e., responding to the emergency by invoking higher powers and then acting as messenger of divine will opposed to satanic evil. In Hazleton, such symbolic acts had no constructive outcome: Satanists were never apprehended and the influx of Latinos was accompanied by a statistical drop in the crime rate. Nevertheless, the reaction of authorities gave the rumors reality. In the same way, the invasion of Iraq *ensured* that the WMD, even if they existed only in Saddam Hussein's wishful thinking, did not and would not exist in literal fact as weapons used against the United States.

2015: Celebrating Arabs

President Bush's efforts to achieve peace through regime change in the Middle East did not, however, dispel the fear of a new terrorist attack. Even though Osama Bin Laden was later assassinated by US military forces and his home organization, al Qaeda, largely disrupted, the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) kept alive the belief that America could experience another 9/11 attack. Bloody attacks by radicalized ethnic immigrants, along with more devastating attacks carried out by ISIS-sponsored terrorists in European cities made this threat all the more plausible. Thus the issue of how best to deter such domestic attacks became a key topic in the 2016 Presidential election. Businessman and reality-show star Donald Trump made his position clear early on in the Republican primaries, which he handily won. In November 2015 he told the crowd at a rally in Birmingham, Mississippi, "Hey, I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down. Thousands of people were cheering. So something's going on. We've got to find out what it is."

Skeptical reporters recognized this story as a claim that had circulated soon after the attacks on the World Trade Center, which had been investigated and found groundless. In fact, the story had been studied as legendary by two folklorists, Janet Langlois (2005) and Gary Alan Fine (Fine and Khawaja 2005, 2010 Fine and Ellis 2010:30-32). So on the following day newscaster George Stephanopoulos challenged Trump on this statement during ABC's news talk show *This Week*. "It did happen. I saw it," the candidate stubbornly replied. "It was on television. I saw it." Trump continued:

I know it might be not politically correct for you to talk about it, but there were people cheering as that building came down — as those buildings came down. And that tells you something. It was well covered at the time, George. Now, I know they don't like to talk about it, but it was well covered at the time. There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down. Not good (Kessler 2015).

In the following days multiple sources corroborated the candidate's memory: rival Ben Carson also recalled seeing the cheering Arabs on television, though he later was unsure whether they were in New Jersey or in the Middle East.² And Trump claimed that "hundreds" of supporters subsequently called in to his campaign or sent tweets confirming that they too had seen the cheering, many of them "in person." "I was 100% right," he concluded (Bronston 2015).

Folklorists can understand Trump's certainty in two mutually supportive ways. First, the strength of the alleged memories recall surveys conducted by psychologists among Americans a year after Iraqi invasion. To their surprise, a third of those surveyed recalled reading news reports saying that the weapons of mass destruction had in fact been found. While no such weapons were found, many news stories had circulated soon after the invasion recording tentative or speculative discoveries. Even though these stories were later retracted, they were enough to create false memories in a substantial number of people (Lewandowski et al 2005). In a parallel way, the stories about alleged celebrations were frequently reported in the press (often skeptically) and circulated on social media through a wide range of conduits. Langlois (2003) found that the intricate network of multiple versions of the celebrating Arab story created a complex labyrinth, each story referencing and reinforcing each other. If the WMD claim, which was (as noted) almost totally without basis, was assumed to be true by a third of Americans, the Celebrating Arabs story, which probably was based on some truth, would become even more entrenched as "100% right," especially as substantial time passed after the 9/11 attacks.

Second, while fact-checkers have shown that there is no credible evidence for "thousands and thousands" of cheering Muslims, it is both plausible and credible that some Middle-Easterners, particularly those who view the United States' involvement in their part of the world to be hegemonic, actually did respond to the successful attack with celebration. Scattered reports from police calls and 911 reports repeatedly complained about small groups of Middle-Eastern youngsters engaged in merry-making in the streets or holding parties on rooftops from which the aftermath of the Twin Towers' fall was plainly visible. No arrests were made and no official or unofficial videos show such events. But the areas from which eyewitness reports were made were neighborhoods with strong Palestinian immigrant populations, and as at least one group of cheering Palestinians were filmed in East Jerusalem, Trump's claim is based on plausible facts (Fine and Khawaja 2003:191, Mueller 2015, Carroll 2015). In any case, as Fine and Khawaja argue, it makes perfect sense for many Americans that the proponents of America's enemy would rejoice over such a tactical victory, just as many Americans later went to streets and rooftops to celebrate the news of Osama bin Laden's assassination. "Might smiling, nodding, or [making] an ambiguous comment constitute a celebration" Fine and Khawaja ask (2005:192).

Conclusions

All three instances make it clear that the three figures, two sitting as President and the third well on his way to the White House, all engaged in legendry, as understood by contemporary legend scholars, rather than in consciously crafted disinformation or propaganda. It is true that the senior Bush may have been manipulated public relations experts, much as Germans during World War II were manipulated by rumors crafted by the British Foreign Office and tactically planted in media stories and letters available to Nazi soldiers and their families. But the President understood the Looted Incubators story as information justifying immediate political action in an ambiguous situation -- simply put, as a contemporary legend. The junior

President Bush likewise saw the WMD claim in the precise same way, and, like many Americans, considered it a justified reason for action even after its factual basis was challenged. Candidate Trump was likewise convinced in the truth of the Celebrating Arabs and in the need to take action to protect loyal Americans from the threat they made visible. He confidently dismissed efforts to characterize it as disinformation: he and many others saw it happen, after all.

Most importantly, we see all of these individuals reacting to legends in the same way as ordinary people. They may well have had professional training and access to more rigorous standards of evidence, but they evaluated the plausibility and credibility of these claims in what scholars have described as a universal mode of exploring ambiguous situations. In other words, if "legendry" is a valid concept for describing human social behavior, then it should hold true at all levels, regardless of class, status, or position. Otherwise folklorists engage in subtle forms of classism, implying that ignorant people tell legends while smart people (like us) engage in disinformation and propaganda, much as it used to be axiomatic that Americans removed supernatural elements from ballad because they were so hard-headed and practical (Ellis 2001: 117). Folklorists can and should take the chance to analyze these and other examples of legendry and share their insights with other disciplines and with an educated lay public.

And, as Bill Nicolaisen said, we should not blindly follow "attractive definitions that confine instead of offering opportunities," but instead "Be receptive to more, closer examinations of more individual legends, widen the range of theoretical and practical issues, involve even more disciplines, and especially more people" (1990a:14). The alternative is that "it will get more and more difficult for us to talk to others about the narratives we have in mind or, what is even more frustrating, we will keep talking *past* each other" (1988:86). The proper response to this theoretical muddle was not retreat, Nicolaisen concluded, but rather a resolve to move toward "greater terminological and . . . greater conceptual clarity" (1988:85). His challenge was founded in his belief that the act of story-telling, in both the plainly fictional realm of the folktale and in the debatably factual world of legends, reshapes events in the past into "narratable time" that is "harnessable for present and future encounters, [and] becomes part of an experience which at least partially enables us to face and cope with what is coming to us" (1985:231). In this way, Nicolaisen argued, the use of narrative to generate usable experience becomes a survival strategy and contributes to our well-being.

One might add, in the name of realism, that legendry often operates in situations in which one subculture feels threatened by another; in such cases a successful legend may serve to generate a sense of well-being on side, but at the expense of portraying the other side as expendable scapegoats. As I have argued (2002), the circulation of legends may give a community (or a nation) a sense that it has done something constructive to protect itself, but in a paradoxical way, they may well preserve the seeds of the violence that they warn against and so in the long run contribute to the social problems that give them rise. Whether we see folk narrative as positive and self-fulfilling or wedge-driving and potentially sociopathic, Nicolaisen is right in seeing it as "an inevitable and necessary result of social interaction" (1990b:10), practiced by educated and professional officials, as well as by peasants and indigenous peoples.

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York: Simon & Schuster.

Endnotes

¹ Presenting fabricated evidence in front of a formal Congressional committee is, of course, a Federal crime; however, "the Congressional Human Rights Caucus." was not a formal governmental entity but a legally separate group operating out of Hill & Knowlton's Washington facilities.

² During the afternoon of the attack, CNN did repeatedly air an authentic clip of Palestinians celebrating the fall of the towers in East Jerusalem.