

The existential threat myth in U.S. inaugural discourse: Metaphors of negative fascination in ideological myth-making

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Abstract: This article explores how metaphors of negative fascination contribute to the construction of the myth of ‘existential threat’ in American inaugural presidential discourse. Drawing on two inaugural speeches from presidents with divergent ideological positions, the study identifies recurring mythologems such as collective victimhood and enemy, crisis and salvation, ‘nation in danger’, a battle for national values, and the messianic defender. These mythologems are framed through emotionally charged narratives of trauma, defense, and salvation. Applying Kövecses model of conceptual metaphor analysis and Lakoff’s typology of metaphors, the study reveals how structural and ontological metaphors enable the transfer of affective and cognitive schemas from the physical domain to abstract political concepts like the economy, political ideas, morality, or statehood. Conceptual metaphor analysis revealed the deployment of source domains such as War, Disease, Death, and Animal to conceptualize target domains like Social Problems, Industrial Decline, Dangerous Ideas, and Nation/State. The fascination effect of these metaphors is intensified through stylistic devices – anaphora, evaluative epithets, emotionally marked lexicon – which enhance affective resonance and reinforce emotional polarization. By introducing the term Metaphors of Negative Fascination, the article highlights the attention-grabbing power of metaphors associated with fear, anxiety, and danger, and their ritual-identification role in constructing the dichotomy of ‘us versus them.’ The analysis demonstrates that Metaphors of Negative Fascination are

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central to the naturalization of polarized worldviews and the mobilization of collective identity through metaphorically structured political myths.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, inaugural discourse, negative fascination effect, mythologeme, political myth

Introduction

Metaphor plays a critical yet underappreciated role in shaping political meaning and identity. In political discourse, metaphors function as cognitive tools that bridge the gap between implicit cultural understandings and explicit ideological positions (Charteris-Black 2021). Since politics is embedded in the broader framework of social experience, which is organized metaphorically (Musolff 2004), political ideologies and myths can also be structured and transmitted through metaphorical language. Myths, as Koselleck (2002) emphasizes, remain a fundamental component of political life that define social order and justify action. The world-modeling functions of both myth and metaphor are deeply interconnected: while myths offer frameworks of collective meaning, metaphors help cognitively and emotionally structure these frameworks (Krader 2021; Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

Despite growing scholarly interest in metaphor in political discourse, the role of metaphor as a myth-making mechanism has received limited attention. Even less explored are metaphors of negative fascination – those that elicit fear, anxiety, or disgust – despite their rhetorical prominence in populist and polarizing discourse. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of the Metaphor of Negative Fascination (MNF) that activates affective responses linked to perceived threat or existential danger. Among the seven ‘languages’ of fascination – a cognitive mechanism that elicits emotional resonance and affective engagement (Kozyarevych-Zozulya 2023), Hogshead (2010) identifies Alarm, which is associated with the threat of negative consequences. Research shows that negative information has a significantly stronger impact on attitudes than positive information (Baumeister et al. 2001) and intensifies cognitive elaboration (Bless et al. 1990; Utych 2018), with particularly pronounced effects in the political sphere (Miller 2010).

Building on research in cognitive linguistics and political psychology (Helm 2009; Wirz 2018), we argue that MNFs function as potent instruments in constructing the political myth of existential threat, promoting the transformation of the negative effect evoked by

connotations of anxiety, disappointment and anger into a positive effect of collective consolidation and mobilization.

Within the framework of discourse-mythological analysis, scholars have identified a number of political myth types such as Unite or Perish, United We Stand, the Blitz Spirit, the American Dream, the Conspiratorial Enemy, the Noble Revolutionary, Hero Mythology, Unity Based on Heroic Continuity, American Uniqueness, and Reunification and Protection, among others (Charteris-Black 2005; Nartey 2019, 2020; Kravchenko et al. 2023). According to Girardet (1986), there are four fundamental political myths: Conspiracy, the Saviour, the Golden Age, and Unity. Most studies explore myth as a tool of symbolic politics, focusing on its narrative dimension and the structure of the mythification process.

In contrast, few studies have addressed the question of how mythical themes can be evoked through metaphors (Geis 1989, 174) and the role of metaphor as a tool for myth-making. Charteris-Black substantiates the deliberate choice of metaphors to construct particular political myths, especially through the activation of “myth-based contrasts between good and evil, light and darkness” (Charteris-Black, 2011, 312). Some studies focus on the use of war, religious, and journey metaphors in creating myths of heroes and villains and the Unite or Perish myth (Nartey 2019; 2020), as well as the myth of unity – via the metaphorical representation of Europe as a family, with the idea of a shared political destiny under the umbrella of a protective European family (Zglobiu 2017, 119; Lakoff 2002). At the same time, the question of why conceptual metaphor can be considered as a unique mechanism for actualizing and constructing myth remains unexplored.

The objective of this study is to analyze the MNFs in two inaugural addresses delivered by American presidents from differing ideological backgrounds as mechanisms for constructing the existential threat myth, taking into account emotional intensifiers that reinforce the myth-making potential of metaphors. By theorizing and empirically illustrating the role of MNFs in constructing myths of national crisis and redemption, the article advances interdisciplinary perspectives at the intersection of cognitive linguistics, political discourse analysis, and myth studies. Theoretically, the research contributes to the theory of political myth-making and identity construction, supporting the view that metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments but cognitive and ideological tools that shape social perception and political reality.

Practically, the identification of consistent metaphor types as techniques of negative fascination across ideologically opposed inaugural addresses can help identify their shared cognitive and affective structures to legitimize leadership and mobilize publics. This insight is particularly relevant for discourse analysts, media scholars, and political strategists interested in the mechanisms of persuasion, polarization, and emotional appeal in public rhetoric. Recognizing the metaphorical construction of existential threats may also contribute to more critical engagement with political narratives in democratic societies.

The paper is divided into two sections – the first one discusses the problem of political mythology with an emphasis on the cognitive mechanisms shared by myth and metaphor, their world-modeling function, emotional logic, and the role of MNFs at different stages of mythification; the second section examines the basic conceptual metaphors, their semantic foci and metaphor types in the perspective of constructing mythologems and narratives, underscoring their dual impact on both emotional engagement and the formation of the myth of existential threat.

Political myth and conceptual metaphor: Points of intersection

Political myth targets the cognitive patterns deeply rooted in people's systems of thought to offer simple solutions to complex issues (Zglobiu 2017, 115). In a similar manner, conceptual metaphors operate at the cognitive level, enabling the understanding of abstract notions in terms of familiar ones by conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another (Lakoff 1980). Both metaphor and myth relate two rationally distinct entities as if they were identical, "processed as the same" (cf. Cassirer's definition of myth 1955, 67–69). Myth fills gaps in argumentation through emotional value (Flood 2013, 115–125) and emotional logic (McGuire 1987). According to Cassirer (1944, 102), mythical thought is deeply impregnated with emotional qualities. The same applies to political metaphors, which appeal primarily to emotions, often bypassing rational argument. Like myth, metaphor performs a world-modeling function – by projecting moral systems onto politics, metaphor shapes political worldviews (Lakoff 2002, 154).

Metaphors of negative fascination reproduce, in a compressed form, the key stages of the mythification process: an anchor, often a misfortune or trauma; an imprint – a deep emotional impact generated

by the anchor – and its translation into an ethos; an archetypal underpinning; the myth shaping narratives; persuasion techniques (Bouchard 2016, 358–359). In the projection onto MNFs, the anchor, which structures the event as trauma, is based on source domains such as *destruction, murder, physical enemies, structural collapse, victim, disease*. The imprint is triggered by the emotional connotations associated with the domains – fear, suffering, grievance. An ethos is achieved through metaphorical implications linked to the quest for restoring social justice, national revival, etc. MNFs activate the archetype of the victim and villain, the archetypal opposition between good and evil, and the messianic hero as national leader. Metaphors contribute to narratives of trauma, the fight for values, salvation, and rebirth. Persuasion techniques include the metaphor itself and intensifiers of negative fascination, enhancing affective engagement and implementing a pathos-driven argumentative model.

This study offers a descriptive qualitative analysis of metaphorical expressions extracted from the inaugural addresses by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021) (hereinafter – BIA) and President Donald Trump (2017) (hereinafter – TIA). The analysis draws on an extended cognitive model of metaphor that integrates domains, frames, and mental spaces, adapted to explore how metaphors contribute to the construction and reinforcement of mentally charged mythologems. The analytical procedure is grounded in Zoltán Kövecses's (2002; 2017) cognitive approach to metaphor, which emphasizes the following principles:

1. Linguistic metaphors evoke broader conceptual systems involving domains (e.g., war, harm), frames (e.g., aggressor–victim), and mental spaces (context-specific scenarios).
2. Source and target domains interact dynamically, allowing for cognitive strategies of elaboration (creation of new source elements), extension (highlighting atypical features), and combination (simultaneous use of multiple metaphors). (Kövecses 2002, 47-49)
3. Frames may activate culturally embedded metaphorical models – tied to mythologems such as ‘siege’, ‘trauma and rebirth’, etc.

The article uses the classification of metaphors proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which is instrumental in understanding the mechanisms of constructing mythologems: structural – one conceptual domain structures another, and ontological – abstract phenomena are conceptualized as entities or substances. For instance, a structural metaphor such as *Social Dangers Are Enemies* contains an action

schema (detect – confront – overcome), which generates a narrative of siege and mobilization.

The myths of existential threat

The myth of existential threat traces back to the archetypal motif of the apocalyptic struggle between Good and Evil and, typically, is associated with the myth of messianic defender, which unites the nation in the struggle against ‘evil.’ Myth-constructing mythologems and narratives are based on metaphors of war, battle, anthropomorphic and animalistic metaphors. In one fragment, there is often an accumulation of metaphors with alarming imagery, enhancing their fascinating effect, as in the metaphorical expression below:

Our history has been a constant struggle between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart. The battle is perennial (BIA).

The statement actualizes the metaphor ‘extremist ideologies are enemies’, which in a deeper structure is related to the conceptual metaphor *politics is war* and, based on the cognitive strategy of Combining, attracts the metaphors *abstract threats are physical enemies; social problems are enemies*. The conceptual metaphor *politics is war* is structural, as political processes are conceptualized through the notions and structure of war: confrontation, enemy, victory, defeat, etc. The semantic foci of the metaphor are confrontation and damage. Based on the cognitive strategy of Extending, war includes the frame of individual conceptualization – division, disruption of unity, extending beyond the traditional war domain but linked to its focus on damage.

The effect of negative fascination is intensified through animalistic metaphors ‘racism/nativism/demonization are beasts’ and ‘fear is a beast’, which are derived from general-level ontological metaphors *emotions are beasts* and *dangerous ideas are animals*, and anthropomorphic personification metaphor *society is a body / nation is a person* (which the beast tears apart).

The metaphor *society is a body* functions here as an ontological metaphor, representing society as a whole, which experiences internal struggle and discord, akin to how a body may experience illnesses or internal conflicts. The semantic focus of the metaphor activated in the context of animalistic metaphors is the possibility of disruption and death, including frames of trauma and the need for healing.

Thus, mental spaces activated by metaphorical expressions are associated with aspects of the source domains *war* and *person*, which are processed through the strategy of elaboration and mapped onto the target domains of *politics* and *nation*. In context, these spaces are enriched with new meanings, including the frames of danger, salvation, and deformation. The resulting blended mental space includes elements such as: the victim (a torn-apart nation); the enemy or persecutor; confrontation (from the war domain); the ‘us versus them’ opposition (the nation vs. the forces of evil); mobilization around the president as the leader of the struggle; the inevitability of the battle (if it is *perennial*). The elements of the mental space construct a narrative in which the nation is portrayed as resisting destructive forces, and the president emerges as a messianic protector.

Thus, metaphors conceptualize the key mythologems of the myth of existential threat – the victim, the enemy, mobilization, and eternal struggle – which are rooted in the archetypal plot of struggle through the prism of the eternal conflict between Good and Evil. The elaboration of metaphors in the narrative of the apocalyptic struggle is realized through words with the meaning of constancy – *constant* (struggle), duration (have *long* torn us apart) and, importantly, eternity: the word *perennial* attracts the archetypal motif of eternal repetition, almost mythological cyclicality of struggle (as in archetypal plots: light against darkness, etc.).

In addition to metaphors, intensifiers of fascination effect include: (a) generalizing nominalization: *battle*, which abstracts the struggle, making it universal and almost sacred; (b) epithet *perennial*; (c) epithet *ugly (reality)*: here, ugliness functions not simply as an emotionally charged expression, but also as an aesthetic signal of moral corruption, drawing on the metaphor *immorality is ugliness*, which contributes to the emotional intensification of the mythologized threat.

The anthropomorphic and war-related MNFs emerge in the following excerpt:

A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear. And now, a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat (BIA).

The first two sentences activate the metaphor *the planet is a victim*, rooted in the ontological metaphor *Earth as a living entity / a person*, which attributes human-like traits to the planet – including the ability

to suffer and plead for help. This enables cognitive frames such as ‘Earth is sending signals’ and ‘needs protection,’ contributing to mythologems of threat, suffering, and vulnerability.

In the latter part, white supremacy, domestic terrorism, and political extremism are metaphorically constructed as internal enemies, invoking the structural metaphor *social/political dangers are enemies*, a subcase of *abstract threats are physical enemies*. This frames ideological threats as active agents in a conflict, structured by a war schema: identify the enemy → confront → defeat. It activates narratives of struggle, moral urgency, and redemption.

The mental space is filled with additional meanings through the inclusive pronoun *we* combined with action verbs of resistance and modal obligation: *we must confront and we will defeat*, which creates a binary opposition (We vs. They) through the strategy of extending, reinforcing the roles of saviors vs. destroyers. Rhetorical strategies intensify engagement: anaphora (*A cry...*) dramatizes urgency; epithet *desperate* amplifies emotional appeal; the construction *we must confront* evokes a mobilizing, militarized response.

Together, these metaphors construct a global crisis narrative, blending ecological and ideological threat into a unified call for action. The myth of existential threat from symbolic enemies – systemic forces endangering national moral and political foundations – is constructed through a cluster of military and animalistic metaphors in the following excerpt:

We face an attack on democracy and on truth. A raging virus. Growing inequity. The sting of systemic racism (BIA).

The metaphor *threats to democracy are war*, derived from general-level metaphor *politics is war*, frames democracy and truth as besieged entities. The war schema includes attack and aggressor, with the latter extended metaphorically to a virus, inequity, and systemic racism – reinforcing the mythologem of existential challenge through heterogeneous but hostile forces. These elements exceed the conventional frames of the war domain but remain associated with its core focus on enemies – here, those attacking the nation.

Through the strategy of completion, these atypical frames added to the source domain activate additional conceptual metaphors: *illness is a beast (a raging virus)* links disease to an aggressive, uncontrollable force requiring defense; *racism is a sting/wound* maps abstract

injustice onto physical harm, drawing from the basic metaphor *social injustice is physical injury*, and intensifying emotional response.

Together, these metaphors, via elaboration and extension, construct a narrative of symbolic siege, where democracy is attacked by diffuse but potent enemies. This evokes mythic themes like ‘a nation in danger’ and ‘moral mission of salvation’, mobilizing a response centered on unity, urgency, and defense.

The fascination effect is heightened here by nominal sentence accumulation, creating climax and emotional build-up; affect-laden vocabulary (raging, attack, sting) reinforcing threat perception and urgency.

The most intense metaphorical imagery in Trump’s speeches emerges in the actualization of the victim mythology, evoking a negative fascination effect through emotionally charged frames of fear, trauma, and decline (Kravchenko 2024). The narrative draws here on such metaphorical source domains as trap, crime, graveyard, massacre, and illness, constructing mythologems of national trauma, vulnerability, and the need for salvation through unity and struggle. Trump’s speech is associated with constructing the frame of ‘threat’ with the dominant emotion of fear with the opposition of demonized others to that group or that (leader) who has the strength to fight them.

But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation (TIA).

In the excerpt the comparison like tombstones activates the metaphor *factories are graves*, grounded in the structural metaphor *decline is death*, mapping features of death (decay, irreversibility) onto economic and industrial decline. Through elaboration, this yields metaphors such as *industrial decline is loss of life* and *the economic landscape is a cemetery*, supporting the trauma narrative and reinforcing the myth of lost national greatness.

The phrase *landscape of our nation* triggers the ontological metaphor *nation is a body*, with the land as a metonym for the national body, now diseased or decayed. This interweaves with death imagery to frame decline as physical and emotional loss, especially resonant in post-industrial regions. The metaphor *poverty is a trap (trapped in poverty)* is derived from the high-level conceptual metaphor *difficulties are containers*, with a focus on entrapment and restricted freedom. Through the strategy of combining, it links to the metaphor *social*

problems are physical dangers, conceptualizing poverty and inequality through embodied experiences of danger and suffering. These metaphors contribute to the salvation narrative, where the leader promises to liberate victims from imposed suffering, while implying the existence of a villain – corrupt elites or former authorities responsible for their entrapment.

The negative fascination effect is enhanced here by emotionally marked imagery (*trap, tombstones, decay*); symbolic associations with loss, pain, and injustice; emphasis on innocent victims (*mothers and children*) and physical danger, especially through references to *inner cities*, which connote neglect and threat.

Together, these metaphors frame a national trauma, intensify emotional engagement, and support a mobilizing myth of resurrection through leadership and redemption.

The mythologems of the apocalyptic crisis and the leader as savior is constructed through the following statement:

This American carnage stops right here and stops right now (TIA).

At the core of this metaphorical expression lies the conceptual structural metaphor *the nation is a person (victim)*. The semantic focus of the source domain, induced by the target, is vulnerability and suffering. Through the cognitive strategy of extending, this focus activates contextually related frames of individual conceptualization – mass destruction, murder (carnage), combat, and rescue (*stops right here and stops right now*), involving additional conceptual metaphors: *national decline is mass destruction/murder; harm to nation is physical attack; political action is rescuing a person*.

The cognitive strategy of elaboration of metaphorical meanings contributes to the narrative of a nation under assault and of retribution, encompassing the roles of the victim (the savable nation), the evil and violent forces (unnamed destroyers), and the President as redeemer. The fascination effect is intensified through rhetorical devices such as hyperbole (*carnage*), and repetition combined with strong deictic anchoring (*right here, right now*), which serve to dramatize the moment of salvation and to frame the leader's intervention as both urgent and redemptive.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the role of metaphors of negative fascination in constructing the enduring myth of existential threat. At

the heart of the myth are the mythologems of external and internal enemies, victimhood, the battle for national values, and the messianic defender, which are associated with narratives of trauma, protection, and salvation, effectively portraying the nation as a collective victim and the president as a heroic figure uniting the country against perceived threats. Conceptual metaphor analysis revealed the deployment of source domains such as War, Disease, Death, and Animal to conceptualize target domains like Social Problems, Industrial Decline, Dangerous Ideas, and Nation/State. Structural metaphors facilitated the transfer of cognitive and emotional schemas, while ontological metaphors rendered abstract concepts tangible, thus embedding mythologems deeply into collective consciousness. The effectiveness of MNFs as techniques for constructing mythologems is enhanced through fascination intensifiers in the rhetorical context of metaphors. Metaphors of negative fascination not only mobilize collective identity and justify political action but also naturalize polarized worldviews by framing complex socio-political issues in emotionally resonant terms.

This analysis emphasizes the crucial role of metaphor in political myths as a technique for shaping public perception and political discourse through its world-modeling function. While the study offers valuable insights into the metaphorical construction of the myth of existential threat in presidential inaugural discourse, it is not without limitations. Since the analysis focused on a limited corpus – the inaugural addresses of two presidents – representing contrasting ideological positions but a single genre and national context, the generalizability of the findings to other inauguration speeches and types of political communication remains constrained. Future research could expand the scope by examining a broader corpus of political texts across time periods, genres, and national contexts to identify patterns in the use of MNFs in constructing the existential threat myth.

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