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# Constructing NAFTA: Myth, Representation, and the Discursive Construction of U.S. Foreign Policy

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The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in November 1993 signified the acceptance of Mexico as an equal trading partner with the United States and Canada. However, accepting Mexico as an equal partner challenged a deeply ingrained U.S. image of Mexico as inferior, childlike, dependent, and suspicious. How was it possible for the U.S. public and its congressional representatives to accept equal economic integration with a country that embodied such a negative image? Addressing this dilemma through a constructivist approach, this article argues that the existing image of Mexico remained intact. The passage of NAFTA instead resulted from a discursive construction of NAFTA that emphasized a positive U.S. self-image through American myths thereby allowing the simultaneous acceptance of Mexico as inferior and as an equal trading partner. American myths and other representational elements constructed NAFTA for the American public and created a policy success for President Clinton. This article relies on an empirical investigation of newspaper advertisements to demonstrate how myths contributed to the discursive construction of NAFTA.

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The successful passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the U.S. Congress in November 1993 signified the acceptance of Mexico as an equal economic partner with the United States and Canada. For the first time in history, a developing nation successfully established itself in a regional trade bloc with two powerful, wealthy, and developed nations. However, accepting Mexico as a country worthy of equal partnership and as an acceptable risk for economic integration challenged the traditional U.S. image of Mexico, and Latin America in general, as inferior, childlike, dependent, and suspicious (Johnson, 1993; M. Cottam, 1994).

The Mexican NAFTA lobby quickly realized this negative image while promoting NAFTA in the United States. It found Mexico depicted as a “low wage, socially troubled, environmentally polluted country that exports illegal aliens to

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the United States" (Lewis and Ebrahim, 1993). A Gallup public opinion poll conducted at the end of June 1993 confirmed that U.S. citizens did not think of Mexico favorably. When asked their overall opinion of Germany, Japan, and Mexico, 63 percent rated Germany as favorable, 48 percent rated Japan as favorable, and only 43 percent rated Mexico as favorable. In addition, 49 percent of the public rated Mexico as unfavorable compared to 46 percent for Japan despite the fact that 68 percent felt that Japan had an unfair trade policy with the United States (Moore, 1993).

Although NAFTA as a policy challenged these images, changing an ingrained image is no small task. According to Martha Cottam (1994), the image the U.S. holds of Latin America as a dependent<sup>1</sup> has withstood the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period demonstrating the resilience of images to withstand major systemic change. She contends that a shift in image comes only when decision-makers recognize a mismatch between the images they hold of a country and their ability to achieve foreign policy goals.<sup>2</sup> On the surface, the passage of NAFTA by the U.S. Congress appears to represent a change in this long-standing image of Latin America. However, this is surprising given that dramatic systemic change previously had no effect. Therefore, NAFTA presents a dilemma regarding ingrained images and U.S. foreign policy. Did the passage of NAFTA signify a necessary shift in Mexico's image due to its conflict with U.S. foreign policy goals? If the negative image remained intact, how was it possible for the U.S. to conceive of and agree to an equal trading partnership with a country considered fundamentally inferior and inept? Indeed, only a few months prior to its passage, NAFTA had seemed an impossibility. In August an opinion poll found that the U.S. public opposed the agreement by a margin of 64–26 percent (Gallup and Moore, 1993:3). Considering this discrepancy, how was the shift from unacceptable to acceptable made possible during the three-month period that followed?

Conventional foreign policy approaches have interrogated and analyzed NAFTA in numerous ways but are subsequently unable to explain its passage in Congress in light of Mexico's negative image.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these conventional approaches ask *how-possible* questions; instead they only ask *why* particular decisions are made (Doty, 1993). When beginning with *why* an event happened, particular policies or decisions are taken as unproblematic, thereby presupposing the identity of the actors involved and the background of meanings that contributed to the very possibility of the event. *Why-questions* ignore the discursive constitution of policy-making that enables certain outcomes and disables others. In contrast, *how-possible* questions inquire into the representations of policy that underlie how knowledge is produced and comprehended and how these representations make certain actions possible (Doty, 1996). Asking *how-possible* questions highlights the importance of power often missing from conventional *why-questions*. Indeed, *how-possible* questions are always implicitly questions of power; not power as held and used by social actors, but power as productive of social meanings, identities, and the realm of imaginable, possible action (Doty, 1996). Asking how NAFTA became an acceptable possibility therefore allows an analysis of the discursive terrain that enabled its success and provides insight into

<sup>1</sup> Cottam (1994:25) defines dependent as "weak, childlike, inferior, inept, and led by a small and often corrupt elite."

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion on the role of images in foreign policy see Jervis, 1976; R. Cottam, 1977; Herrmann and Fischerkeller, 1995; and Herrmann et al., 1997.

<sup>3</sup> There are literally shelves of books on the topic of NAFTA and economics. See, e.g., works by Fraser (1992), Wilson and Smith (1992), Barrett (1993), Twomey (1993), and Moran and Abbott (1994). For a rational-choice explanation of why NAFTA succeeded, see Mayer, 1998. For an analysis of the NAFTA negotiations see Cameron and Tomlin, 2000.

how representational practices in discourse contribute to the making of U.S. foreign policy.

This article argues that a particular discursive construction privileging traditional, dominant American myths made NAFTA's passage in Congress possible. By connecting the trade accord to common American myths, NAFTA's representation in U.S. public speeches, newspapers, and advertisements allowed it to become accessible and of concern to a previously disinterested public. NAFTA was transformed from a trade accord between three countries into a symbol of contested U.S. identity. Understanding how it was possible for NAFTA to succeed in Congress requires an examination of the politics of language and symbolism rather than solely the politics of trade and economics. NAFTA's success in Congress was made possible not through a change in Mexico's image, but through public discourses that socially constructed NAFTA as an extension of the American Dream and as a tool of U.S. leadership. NAFTA came to represent two opposing sensibilities: one that emphasized U.S. national identity as positive, strong, hopeful, and economically prosperous and one that emphasized the negative image of Mexico to call for protection of American identity from corrupt outside forces. A battle of contrasting American myths and cultural symbols resulted in a dominant NAFTA discourse that allowed the simultaneous acceptance of Mexico as inferior and as a valuable trading partner.

The discourses of trade that emerged during 1993 elevated the importance of trade politics for the U.S. public. Prior to the proposal to establish NAFTA, trade was not often the center of controversial debates in the U.S.; it drew marginal interest from elites at best. Yet in the fall of 1993, NAFTA upstaged health care to catch the attention of the U.S. public. It changed the politics of trade and laid the groundwork for future debates.<sup>4</sup> Contributing to an established literature on the role of discourses in foreign policy analysis, this article offers an extension of the substantial body of research conducted on NAFTA that currently fails to examine how a politics of discursive representation enabled its passage.

### Situating NAFTA

Understanding the controversy over NAFTA depends on revisiting the political context of the time that the NAFTA agreement entered the public arena from the end of August through the end of November 1993. At this time the political climate was intense, with NAFTA making headlines on almost a daily basis. President Clinton was at the center of this debate, particularly because NAFTA was billed as his first test in pushing a foreign policy initiative through Congress. This proved a difficult task given that NAFTA was a Republican initiative left over from the Bush administration, and organized labor, a stronghold of support during Clinton's 1992 election campaign, was adamantly opposed.

In addition, Clinton had not been fully supportive of NAFTA during his campaign for the presidency. To appeal to labor and others concerned about the trade accord, he refused to sign the treaty without including side agreements on labor and the environment (Lewis and Ebrahim, 1993). On the campaign trail in 1992, he had publicly stated:

From everything we read, the treaty [NAFTA] has a whole lot of things in it for people who want to invest money and nothing for labor practices nor for the

<sup>4</sup> The protests in Seattle in December 1999 of more than 50,000 people over the World Trade Organization demonstrated a sustained public resistance to liberalized global trade that publicly originated with the NAFTA agreement. Many of the same opposition groups were present as well as the same representations of the effects of global trade (i.e., job loss, undemocratic negotiations, environmental degradation, and lower U.S. wages).

environment. It looks like they're [the Bush administration] going to take a dive and just go for the money and it's wrong. (Brownstein, 1992:A1)

Given Clinton's relatively weak position on NAFTA during his presidential campaign, it was no surprise that many questioned his ability to commit to NAFTA and take the necessary steps to garner faltering congressional support. The NAFTA opposition recognized Clinton's initial ambivalence and took advantage by initiating a public campaign against NAFTA as early as February 1993. Ross Perot, who became the most visible leader of the opposition, aired a paid infomercial against NAFTA in May, urging viewers to write and call their congressional representatives. An organized postcard campaign against NAFTA followed, and by the summer, mail in most congressional offices was running 20–1 against the trade accord (Mayer, 1998).

In August of 1993, a mere three months before the House of Representatives vote, NAFTA appeared an unlikely possibility. Representative David Bonior (D-Michigan) publicly declared that "up to two-thirds to maybe 75 percent of the Democratic caucus in the House is opposed to it [NAFTA]" ("NAFTA Has Little Support," 1993:A9). Newspaper reports predominantly described NAFTA's dismal reception in the U.S. A *Washington Post* reporter characterized the accord "as dull as dishwater for most Americans, those few who have even heard of it" (Devroy, 1993:A12). In addition, newspaper headlines early on in the campaign made declarations such as "Campaign to Sell Free Trade Pact Gets Off to Limp Start" (Broder and Gerstenzang, 1993:A11) and "Perot Takes Early Lead in Race on Trade Pact" (Devroy, 1993:A12). By September, a *Wall Street Journal* poll found that only 25 percent of the U.S. public were in support of NAFTA, the lowest level of approval registered at any time throughout the year, and 74 percent believed that U.S. manufacturing jobs would move to Mexico if NAFTA passed (Seib, 1993). This widespread opposition to NAFTA by the U.S. public and the intense opposition to the agreement by many congressional Democrats left the Clinton administration with an unanticipated disadvantage only a few months before the NAFTA vote.

Senator Bill Bradley urged the Clinton administration and the business community to launch a public campaign for NAFTA. He realized that they were letting the opponents frame the public debate and insisted that the business community hire a campaign strategist to develop and publicly test positive messages for NAFTA. He warned the NAFTA proponents, "This isn't going to be trade politics as usual. You need to think of this as an election" (Mayer, 1998:240). In August the Business Roundtable was convinced and launched a \$5 million advertising campaign to improve public opinion on NAFTA. In effect, this meant altering the discursive terrain on which NAFTA was being represented. The public debate on NAFTA now entered the fall with supporters and opponents fully focused on their respective campaigns to shape the public (and congressional) understandings of what NAFTA would mean and what it symbolized.

To this point the opposition clearly had succeeded in defining what the major issues of the public debate would be; that is, lost jobs, lower wages, and environmental degradation. A September *Wall Street Journal* poll found that most Americans were more inclined to believe negative predictions about NAFTA's consequences than positive ones. For example, 54 percent of Americans agreed that wages would have to fall to compete with Mexico, and 55 percent also agreed that in the U.S. only corporations would benefit from NAFTA. In addition, 69 percent believed that Mexico could not be trusted to follow side agreements on labor and the environment (Seib, 1993). Considering the political climate encompassing NAFTA in August, September, and October, the passage of NAFTA in the House of Representatives by 34 votes one month later on November 17 surprised many congressional leaders, labor organizers, and citizens who had predicted its

defeat both publicly and in political circles (Cloud, 1993).<sup>5</sup> With that obstacle overcome, NAFTA easily passed the Senate on November 24, and was signed by President Clinton for implementation on January 1, 1994.

This article argues that, against intense perceptions and predictions of failure, NAFTA became possible through discursive constructions that drew on the re-establishment of a positive U.S. identity through familiar American myths. The pro-NAFTA discourse constructed NAFTA in a way that enabled the possibility of accepting the policy despite its association with Mexico. President Clinton acknowledged that changing the meaning of NAFTA was paramount to his success. "When we started, NAFTA had significance for those who were fighting against it, all out of proportion to the impact it could have. . . . It now has acquired a symbolic significance for those of us who are for it, too" (quoted in Mayer, 1998:309). Understanding how NAFTA's success became possible, therefore, requires an analysis of the role of discourse and language in constructing foreign policy.

### Discourse and the Production of Meaning

Many theoretical approaches have been used to analyze foreign policy, and those who examine how policy is discursively constructed are certainly in the minority. Indeed, why argue that NAFTA was discursively constructed when other, perhaps more widely accepted, approaches could be used? Given the U.S. image of Mexico and its role in Latin American policies in the past, perhaps a cognitive psychology approach could offer insight into how NAFTA was perceived by the U.S. public and policy-makers and serve as an alternative to the discursive approach in analyzing NAFTA's success.

#### *Cognitive Psychology and Foreign Policy Analysis*

By calling attention to the cognitive aspects of individuals involved in foreign policy making, the political psychology literature problematizes the social environment of the subject and contributes the possibility that policy is not always based on rational choices and interests, but can be affected by the cognitive beliefs, perceptions, and personalities of key individuals.<sup>6</sup> Political psychology research brings to the forefront of foreign policy analysis worldviews and beliefs as significant factors in policy-making.

Cognitive images are one aspect of this literature and research has examined the impact of images on various foreign policy decisions (Herrmann, 1985; M. Cottam, 1986). These images function as perceptual filters and organize the world based on certain categories. They enable a response to certain behaviors and act like stereotypes, complete with certain "facts" that support the reason for such categorization. Policy-makers and individuals have a political worldview composed of images including prototypes of the enemy, ally, and dependent (M. Cottam, 1994). Martha Cottam argues that the image of Latin America has influenced U.S. policy in the region, which explains U.S. propensity for intervention as well as periods of neglect over the past century. A cognitive analysis of U.S.

<sup>5</sup> As late as November 4, 1993, a mere thirteen days before the vote in the House of Representatives, Representative Richard Gephardt confided privately to Carlos Heredia and Jorge Castañeda, leading members of the limited NAFTA opposition in Mexico, that according to his calculations and conversations with congressional members, NAFTA would lose (Castañeda, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Scholars contributing to this field include Jervis (1976); R. Cottam (1977); Herrmann (1977, 1987); Falkowski (1979); Herrmann (1985); M. Cottam (1986, 1992, 1994); Walker (1987); Cottam and Shih (1992); Shapiro and Bonham (1982); and Herrmann et al. (1997).

foreign policy poses the question: How did U.S. policy-makers' images of a state or region influence their policies, tactics, and strategies?<sup>7</sup>

However, posing this question in the case of NAFTA reveals an explanatory lapse when relying on cognitive psychology alone. The negative image of Mexico is apparent in policy-makers' tactics and strategies in addressing NAFTA, but the success of the policy defies a cognitive explanation. The negative image would appear to predict defeat for NAFTA. It would also imply U.S. resistance to equal partnership with an inferior and corrupt state if sovereignty were to be lost and national laws potentially weakened. In the case of NAFTA, something besides cognitive images was at play. This article argues that, despite the successful passage of NAFTA, the negative, dependent image of Mexico did not change. If this is the case, how did policy-makers address the impact of this image, an image with persuasive power that has influenced Latin American policy in the past?

In cognitive approaches to foreign policy, the individual controls what constitutes meaning. A discursive approach using a Foucauldian perspective argues that no one controls meaning. Instead, meaning is created in the play of discourses during a specific historical period (Foucault, 1972). Although a discursive approach connects the agent (or subject) to the situation or event thereby contrasting the cognitive approach's distinction between the person making a decision and the "decision situation," these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Shapiro, 1988). In tandem, they offer an explanation for the creation of collective meaning that connects the power of language with the tenacity of established cognitive images. In other words, a policy such as NAFTA is made meaningful by the competing discourses and elements of representations surrounding it *and* the prior cognitive images held by people. The discursive construction of NAFTA can indicate whether association with a dependent country is good (i.e., an opportunity to influence a fledgling democracy, a potential economic gain, a chance to improve environmental and labor standards) or bad (i.e., loss of control through globalization, weakening of power, lowering labor standards) while the dominant cognitive image of that country as a dependent remains intact.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Politics of Language*

The competing NAFTA discourses consisted of representational elements that gave additional meaning to the trade accord beyond conventional understandings of trade as the lowering of tariffs or the establishment of a regional trade block. NAFTA acquired national significance and importance through its public representation as an extension of the American Dream and tool of U.S. leadership. A discourse is established through representational elements that consist of certain phrases, visual images, myths, analogies, and metaphors (Hall, 1997). They are then circulated and through this circulation become symbols of a larger discursive construction that comes to define the *thing*, in this case, NAFTA, in a very real and formidable manner. Therefore, meaning is produced and assigned through language that constructs "a cluster of ideas, images and practices [that] provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall, 1997:6). These "clusters of ideas," or political symbols, gain currency based on the associations they evoke. By touching cultural values and myths, symbols "evoke an attitude, a set of impressions or a pattern of events associated through time,

<sup>7</sup> Cottam specifically addresses this question in regard to military intervention in Latin America during and immediately after the Cold War. However, in later research she utilizes a similar framework to analyze the U.S.-Mexican border relations in the war on drugs (Cottam and Marenin, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Martha Cottam for her comments on this point.

through space, through logic or through imagination with the symbol" (Edelman, 1964:6). It is then possible for competing representations to evoke contesting meanings and for some discourses to acquire dominance over others based on the power of these associations.

A discursive approach to foreign policy analysis implies that language has a productive power and is not simply a conduit of information as assumed in cognitive psychology.<sup>9</sup> Instead, language consists of signifiers that do not necessarily refer back to signifieds with fixed meaning, but can refer to other signifiers thereby constructing a web of symbols that allows the ever expanding circulation of possible meanings (Doty, 1993). This understanding has radical implications for foreign policy analysis, as the locus of power is not always in the dominant players involved in policy-making or in the policy decision itself, but in the discourses that impose meaning and construct possible policy actions. Discursive representations of policy are constrained and enabled by how well they fit within the cultural system and the already established images of a given society (Doty, 1993). If indeed the anti-NAFTA campaign established its arguments early on and they fit within the already established representations of Mexico, that is, the negative image, then each subsequent statement on the trade accord had to fit within this representation. Even the pro-NAFTA arguments were constrained by these representations, so consequently the "debate" on NAFTA was limited to a relatively small set of possible issues such as jobs, environment, wages, and immigration.

Myths that connected the "dull" trade accord to passionate American cultural values formed a central component of the NAFTA discourses. This is not surprising given that myths are important in forming and solidifying a national identity and are often utilized and deployed by policy-makers to generate support and elevate the national importance of policy. Myths also help produce a "common interpretation of the world in a situation where many individuals possess little information" (Lotz, 1997:73). Therefore, myths can assist policy-makers in explaining to the public why an abstract policy, or one whose outcome may be unknown, is important and worthy of support. Often deployed by policy-makers when introducing a policy to the public, myths are used to incorporate the familiar and accepted with the new and questionable (Kenworthy, 1995).

Myths can stem from historical narratives, such as accounts of war, but express an emotive *characterization* of the event rather than an account of history itself. For example, in explaining America's purpose for military involvement in Kosovo, Clinton evoked the "just war" myth of World War II to justify intervention in an unfamiliar foreign country.<sup>10</sup> By capturing only a characterization of World War II and emphasizing the good versus evil association, Clinton added weight to his argument for intervention in Kosovo and linked this current event to a past, positive, U.S. cultural memory. As Kenworthy (1995:13) emphasizes, "myth can be understood as a story that constructs meaning by mobilizing associations already extant in the culture and re-deploying them toward new objects (public policies for example) that then acquire the authority of those older meanings." Myths help construct the meaning of a policy for the public by associating policy action with the deeply ingrained national values of society.

Whereas a particular discourse is historically situated, myths have the ability to transcend a specific historical time. They are referents from the past that when

<sup>9</sup> Prominent international relations scholars who have provided insight into the effect of language and discursive practices on international relations include Der Derian (1987); Shapiro (1988, 1989); Der Derian and Shapiro (1989); Ashley and Walker (1990); Campbell (1990, 1992); George and Campbell (1990); Weber (1990, 1992); Doty (1993); Harré and Gillett (1994); Weldes and Saco (1996); Laffey and Weldes (1997); Peterson (1998); and Alvarez et al. (1998).

<sup>10</sup> See Vlahos, 1988, for a description of how presidents have used myths during war throughout U.S. history.



evoked add weight to a particular discourse and give additional meaning and importance to an event. Myths exist as collective representations and possessions of a given community or culture and are not the manifestations of any one individual. Yet myths are recognized by individuals and can be drawn on for a variety of purposes (Tudor, 1972). As Tudor explains, "In telling a myth, the myth-maker not only intends his audience to understand the message he has in mind; he intends to make them behave in a certain way" (1972:48). At the forefront of this particular use of myth is the political myth. The political myth tells the story of a political society that often existed in the past and now must be restored in some way (Tudor, 1972). Myths, allegories, analogies, and politics are therefore always intertwined.<sup>11</sup>

American myths in particular have a long history of association with public policy. As Vlahos (1988:1091) explains, "more than other modern societies, America relies, even depends, on myth to cement its confidence in current policies." President Reagan, for example, relied on the myth of the American Revolution to generate support for the "freedom fighting" contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. Constitution also serves as a founding myth for American society and since it represents a core value of U.S. culture, it is often evoked to garner support for policy.<sup>13</sup> Politicians therefore frequently use myths representing the core beliefs of society to shape public opinion and to wrest consent for action when faced with a particularly skeptical public.

### Myth and NAFTA

Lotz (1997) found that American myths were used by both Vice-President Al Gore and Ross Perot during the NAFTA debate held on CNN's *Larry King Live* on November 9, 1993. In his analysis Lotz developed a framework for examining the use of myth in public discourses. He built on a content analysis approach and constructed a method of coding text that allowed long-standing American myths to be recognized in the discussion of NAFTA. Although this approach is limited by its positivist assumptions, it serves as a useful tool in this analysis of NAFTA discourses. Applying Lotz's framework and extending the analysis beyond the *Larry King Live* transcripts raises the possibility that Lotz's findings apply more broadly and that discourses connecting NAFTA to American myths circulated throughout the public discussion of NAFTA in the U.S.

Lotz categorized three main American myths used in discussing NAFTA: American Dream, American Exceptionalism, and Populism (Lotz, 1997:82). The American Dream myth embodies the belief that America is the "source of human progress and can achieve perfection as a society" (Vlahos, 1988:1092). This myth supports the idea that America must strive for *a more perfect union* where all people have the opportunity to *pull themselves up by their bootstraps* and create better lives *than their parents had*. The second myth, American Exceptionalism, refers to the belief that America is the *greatest nation in the world, the only remaining superpower*, and, as Benjamin Franklin wrote, "America's Cause is the Cause of all Mankind" (Kenworthy, 1995:23). The American Exceptionalism myth has two contradictory secondary myths within it: Isolationism and Leadership. The Isolationism myth refers to America's need to protect its greatness against corruption from the outside, while the American Leadership myth embodies America's moral strength and ability to spread greatness and American values—democracy,

<sup>11</sup> See Dolan, 1994, and Foong Khong, 1992, for examples of how allegories and analogies have been used in U.S. foreign policy making.

<sup>12</sup> See Kenworthy, 1995, for an elaboration on the Reagan and Bush administrations' use of myths in Latin American policy-making.

<sup>13</sup> Kenworthy (1995) cites the example of a Reagan speech on Latin America that began, "We the peoples of the Americas," as an obvious allusion to the U.S. Constitution as a myth being re-deployed to the entire hemisphere.

freedom, liberal economies—around the globe. The final myth, Populism, contains the theme that “the people” rule (such as “of the people, for the people, by the people”), emphasizes the need for democratic participation, and upholds that individuals have rights that should not be violated by dominant, institutional power or the wealthy. This myth values the protection of the individuals against monopolies, and the working class from exploitation by elites.

In examining transcripts of the Gore/Perot debate, Lotz found that Gore relied heavily on the American Dream myth and the secondary myth of American Exceptionalism (American Leadership) while Perot focused almost exclusively on Populism and the contrasting secondary myth of American Exceptionalism (Isolationism). Both Gore and Perot relied on different myths to substantiate their claims about the effects of NAFTA, but neither directly contradicted the other's representation of Mexico. In fact, Perot's dominant use of Isolationism and Populism most likely reflected his belief that these myths would evoke and affirm the already established dependent image of Mexico and that accessing this ingrained image would solicit support for his anti-NAFTA position. Gore never refuted Perot's portrayal of Mexico but instead relied on myths that drew on the greatness of the U.S. and its ability to lead, to rise above adversity, and to provide a beacon of hope for the future. Gore relied on the myths that re-emphasized the U.S. self-image as unique, strong, and prosperous to persuade the public that supporting NAFTA was good for the country.

While the Gore/Perot debate was an important component of NAFTA's success, it was situated in a larger NAFTA discourse that consists of multiple forums including newspaper advertisements. Lotz's research begins an interesting investigation into the use of myth in passing NAFTA, but fails to address the larger discourse. Clearly without prior representations of NAFTA, the Gore/Perot debate would have generated little interest among most Americans and, more important, would have had even less meaning for them. Therefore, this article contributes to and extends research on myths and NAFTA by investigating other representations such as advertisements that laid the discursive groundwork on which the Gore/Perot debate took place.

### Advertising NAFTA

Advertisements, although rarely used as data in foreign policy analysis, provide a window onto how images and text play out in the broader discursive contestation of policy debates. Images and myths are apparent in advertisements in ways often hidden in public speech or debates because the style of the medium demands the display of complex thoughts in the format of simple text and pictures. Indeed, advertisements often rely on myths to make associations between the consumer and the product (Kenworthy, 1995). However, advertisements are not simply manifestations of advertisement agencies' objectives and thoughts. To be effective in influencing opinion or even understood in general, advertisements must elaborate and capture the perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs that already exist for a particular audience (Johnson, 1993). For example, an advertisement displaying an image of a polluted river with toxic waste signs juxtaposed to the text “NAFTA's an environmental loser” would not make sense unless it fit into an already existing representation of Mexico as a country with low environmental standards. Therefore, as a medium, political advertisements provide a microcosm of the discursive elements involved in representing an issue or a candidate.

In the U.S., an elaborate media campaign was launched by those with a vested interest in promoting their positions on NAFTA. Newspaper advertisements were one component of this campaign and began appearing in major newspapers about three months prior to the congressional vote. The images and representations of NAFTA that appeared in these advertisements are indicative of how

NAFTA was discursively constructed and how myths and images influenced this construction. Because advertisements work in part by engaging emotion and memories, they are the perfect conduit for the productive power of language and political symbolism and an effective tool for analyzing the representational elements of a discourse. By articulating how an issue is represented for the public, advertisements demonstrate the realm of possible action and the attempt at influencing what issues and actions can become possible. However, advertisements alone did not influence public opinion on NAFTA. In fact, there is no possible way to determine what direct, causal impact the advertisements had in terms of NAFTA's success. Using advertisements as a methodological tool in no way implies that advertisements were a missing causal variable or that advertisements reached a large enough audience to have significant impact on the NAFTA debate. Examining advertisements does provide a method of interrogating the NAFTA discourses at large because they reflect the important, influential, and compelling components of the discursive construction of NAFTA as it became meaningful to the mass public. Indeed, advertisements are useful and important precisely because they are not acting alone and do not exist as a single causal variable. Advertisements only succeed if they fit in an already existing framework of discursive representation. They capture, in an alluring combination of pictures and text, the often elusive circulating representations that give meaning to an event or thing. Contained in each advertisement is a significant piece of the broader, discursive puzzle that gave rise to the contrasting elements of the NAFTA discourses. Examining NAFTA advertisements, therefore, provides insight into how NAFTA became a possibility and how myths and the negative image of Mexico interplayed in the debate over this important trade policy.

This article examines the advertisements both for and against NAFTA that appeared in three major newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, from August 15, 1993, to November 17, 1993. Each newspaper was scanned for advertisements regarding NAFTA, and a total of forty-one advertisements were found. The analysis of the individual advertisements followed the framework explicated by Lotz (see Table 1). By replicating his method rather than creating original categories of meaning catering to the data, this study intends to demonstrate a consistency in the use of myths beyond the *Larry King Live* debate and throughout the NAFTA discourse in accordance with Lotz's own definitions. If in fact the advertisements relied on the same myths later drawn on by Perot and Gore, then the NAFTA discourse is traceable from at least August 1993 and a case for the importance of myth in constructing the meaning of NAFTA is strengthened beyond one empirical study.

Lotz's definitions of the three myths in reference to the NAFTA debate are shown in Table 2. References to jobs for U.S. workers (either potential job gain or loss), standard of living, and admiration for Americans and their products are coded as the American Dream myth. Statements about the American ability to rise to the challenge and to create positive change in Mexico, and about American strength to overcome deficiencies, are coded as the American Leadership branch of the American Exceptionalism myth. References to American vulnerability (possible job loss due to conditions in Mexico or elsewhere), worsening environmental standards, and terrible Mexican conditions are coded as the Isolationism branch of American Exceptionalism. The last myth, Populism, is coded when there are references to the democratic process, to elites, corporations, and lobbyists versus the *people*, to *special interest groups*, or to the foreign lobby (Lotz, 1997).

The coding method as applied to newspaper advertisements followed these rules. Each advertisement was examined and if one or more of these references appeared, it was coded under that particular myth. Quite often one advertisement was coded under more than one myth. For example, the American Dream

TABLE 1. Chronology of NAFTA Advertising, 9/16/93–11/17/93

<i>Date</i>	<i>Paper</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Myth</i>	<i>Citation</i>
16-Sept	WP	Presidents Support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A4
* 22-Sept	WP	8 Fatal Flaws of Nafta	A.D., P., I.	A29
* 22-Sept	NY	8 Fatal Flaws of Nafta	A.D., P., I.	A17
* 23-Sept	NY	Slaughter of Sea Turtles sign of Nafta	I.	B7
14-Oct	WP	Mexico Today–supports Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A28
19-Oct	NY	Special Ad Section Supporting Nafta	A.D., A.L.	D12–D20
* 21-Oct	WP	Real Cost of Nafta–job loss	A.D., I., P.	A28
22-Oct	WP	Open doors to job growth	A.D., A.L.	A20
24-Oct	WP	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A40
24-Oct	NY	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A23
24-Oct	LA	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A31
26-Oct	WP	Ad Supplement: Nafta Yes!	A.L., A.D.	B1–B8
* 27-Oct	WP	Ad Supplement: Nafta No!	A.D., I., P.	A18–A28
* 28-Oct	WP	Real Cost of Nafta–job loss	A.D., I., P.	A20
28-Oct	NY	Presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L., P.	D3
28-Oct	LA	Mexico Today–supports Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A17
31-Oct	WP	Presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L., P.	B4
31-Oct	NY	Nafta will help them grow up to be what they want	A.D.	A35
31-Oct	LA	Presidents Support Nafta	A.D., A.L., P.	A23
2-Nov	NY	Nafta will help them grow up to be what they want	A.D.	A17
* 4-Nov	WP	And lobbyists tell us N. won't threaten . . . big corps.	P., I.	A18
4-Nov	NY	Trading options	A.L., A.D.	A27
8-Nov	WP	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A16
8-Nov	NY	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A5
8-Nov	LA	300 Economists, 6 presidents support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A15
9-Nov	WP	When did more customers mean fewer jobs . . .	A.L., A.D.	C5
* 10-Nov	WP	Why are MNCs spending \$ to pass Nafta?	A.D., P., I.	A24
10-Nov	NY	Nafta will help them grow up to be what they want	A.D.	A16
10-Nov	LA	Presidents Support Nafta	A.D., A.L.	A6
12-Nov	WP	Asking you not to believe in fairy tales	P., A.D., A.L.	A45
12-Nov	NY	Nafta will help them grow up to be what they want	A.D.	A35
12-Nov	NY	Asking you not to believe in fairy tales	P., A.D., A.L.	A13
12-Nov	LA	Asking you not to believe in fairy tales	P., A.D., A.L.	A25
* 15-Nov	NY	8 Fatal Flaws of Nafta	A.D., P., I.	A5
15-Nov	NY	Letter to Pres. supporting Nafta	A.L., A.D.	A7
15-Nov	NY	Nafta will help them grow up to be what they want	A.D.	A13
16-Nov	WP	Nafta essential for tomorrow	A.L., A.D.	A18
* 16-Nov	WP	8 Fatal Flaws of Nafta	A.D., P., I.	A19
17-Nov	WP	Courage to do what's right–pass Nafta	A.L., A.D.	A21
* 17-Nov	WP	Who wins? Who loses–people lose	A.D., P., I.	A20
17-Nov	WP	Nafta essential for tomorrow	A.L., A.D.	A19

Codes: A.D. = American Dream

WP = Washington Post

\* = Anti-Nafta

A.L. = American Leadership

NY = New York Times

P. = Populism

LA = Los Angeles Times

I. = Isolationism

and American Leadership were often evoked in one single advertisement. An advertisement in the special supplemental section of the *Washington Post* declared, “Who says America isn’t ready to compete globally? We’re ready to compete, and we’re ready for NAFTA. NAFTA will strengthen America’s position in the global economy, open doors to economic growth, and increase U.S. jobs” (“Who Says,” 1993:B8). This advertisement would be coded under American Dream because of its reference to more U.S. jobs and American Leadership as it references America’s ability to compete and take a leading role in the global economy.

TABLE 2. Key Concepts for Coding Myths

<i>American Dream</i>	<i>Isolationism</i>
Increase or decrease in U.S. jobs	Job loss specifically relating to conditions in Mexico
Standard of living	Lowering of environmental standards
Admiration for U.S. products	Terrible conditions in Mexico
<i>American Leadership</i>	<i>Populism</i>
Rise to challenge	Democratic process
Create positive change in Mexico	Elites vs. people
Strength to overcome deficiencies	Special interest groups or foreign lobby

Isolationism and Populism were often found together in the same advertisement as were American Dream and American Leadership. An anti-NAFTA advertisement, for example, stated, "Under NAFTA, the U.S. could be forced to import pesticide-laden food or to pay fines to keep the food out. Say hello to more poisons in your food. Say good-bye to the democratic process" ("Eight Fatal," 1993:A29). Here, the reference to lower environmental standards owing to contact with Mexico evoked Isolationism and the reference to an infringed democratic process evoked Populism.

Coding the advertisements according to Lotz's categories revealed almost identical findings for both the Gore/Perot debate and the NAFTA advertisements (see Table 3). Some of the similarities of the two studies are described and highlighted here. The anti-NAFTA advertisements and Perot used Isolationism more frequently than any other myth. On the other hand, the pro-NAFTA advertisements and Gore focused most on the American Dream myth. Neither Gore nor the pro-NAFTA advertisements evoked Isolationism at all. Similarly, American Leadership was used extensively by the pro-NAFTA advertisements and Gore, but was not once evoked by the anti-NAFTA advertisements. Further analysis of the content of the advertisements will explain more specifically how these myths permeated the contested NAFTA discourses.

### Appearance of Myth

#### *American Dream*

The American Dream was the most frequently used myth in the NAFTA discourses and consisted of 40 percent of the total myths used by both pro- and anti-NAFTA advertisements, almost 20 percent more than the next most popular myth. In the pro-NAFTA advertisements alone, it was coded 30 times out of 39 total references and made up 49 percent of the total of myths used by this side of the campaign. The myth primarily appeared as concern for jobs and as fre-

TABLE 3. Comparison of Findings (Use of Myths by Percentage)

	<i>American Dream</i>	<i>American Leadership</i>	<i>Isolationism</i>	<i>Populism</i>
Pro-NAFTA Advertisements	49%	41%	0%	10%
Gore	44%	33%	0%	22%
Anti-NAFTA Advertisements	30%	0%	37%	34%
Perot	20%	7%	40%	33%

quent mention of how NAFTA would improve the lives of individual Americans. The very first NAFTA advertisement appearing in the data set appealed to the American Dream myth. Boxed on both sides by pictures of Presidents Clinton, Carter, Ford, Bush, Reagan, and Nixon, the text stated:

What do these Presidents agree on? NAFTA. A trade agreement that: Creates as many as 200,000 new American jobs; Saves 700,000 existing American jobs that are dependent on exports to Mexico; Lowers barriers to U.S. exports so that we can sell more products to Mexico and Canada. ("What Do These Presidents," 1993:A4)

The American Dream myth also appeared with mention of job loss since *any* reference to American jobs fits the category. One anti-NAFTA advertisement coded under the American Dream myth stated, "It's time to tell American taxpayers about the real cost of NAFTA. Americans give up their jobs, lower their incomes and pay for it all with their taxes. It's a bad policy and American voters know it" ("It's Time to Tell," 1993:A28).

However, advertisements coded under the American Dream referenced more than jobs and often framed NAFTA as incorporating American values, hopes for the future, and quality of life. For example, one pro-NAFTA advertisement directly referenced the American Dream in portraying NAFTA as beneficial for the future:

More than just about anything, the American Dream has to do with passing on to our children a better life than we had. But for the first time in generations, there's real doubt as to whether Americans will be able to do that. Which is why NAFTA is so important. ("NAFTA Will Help Them," 1993:A35)

A pro-NAFTA advertisement addressing quality of life warned of the detrimental effects of trade barriers to America's future:

In today's interdependent global economic system, the free flow of trade and investment across borders is fundamental. Barriers to trade are barriers to economic growth. They result in lost opportunities to expand new markets, higher prices for consumers and they drain economic vitality. The result: fewer new jobs and an overall diminished quality of life. ("Trading Options," 1993:A27)

In the supplemental anti-NAFTA advertising section of the *Washington Post*, one advertisement warned, "The proposed NAFTA agreement will change American life forever. It will lower the standard of living in the U.S. while enriching only the already elite of Mexican society" ("NAFTA No!" 1993:A19).

Promoting a larger export market for American goods was also a large part of the pro-NAFTA discourse and was classified under the American Dream myth. "Contrary to popular belief, Mexicans can afford American products. The average Mexican already spends \$450 a year on American goods. That's more than the average Japanese spends" ("For Once," 1993:A13). Another advertisement stated, "NAFTA lowers barriers in Mexico so we can sell more American products to a market that already spends \$40 billion a year on U.S.-made goods" ("NAFTA. Controversial Today," 1993:A18).

By associating NAFTA with the American Dream, these advertisements added weight and importance to the policy and connected the trade accord to the lives of average Americans. As the dominant myth of the pro-NAFTA advertisements, the American Dream associated NAFTA with a positive and hopeful self-image of America's future and was utilized to overcome the negative image that evoked doubts about associating with Mexico.

*American Leadership*

The American Leadership myth refers to America's ability to overcome adversity and to create positive change around the world through connection with other countries. References to American Leadership were coded twenty-five times for (were in 41 percent of) the pro-NAFTA advertisements and not once for the anti-NAFTA advertisements. American Leadership was the second most frequently used myth by the pro-NAFTA advertisements. Recall that American Leadership is one branch of the American Exceptionalism myth along with Isolationism.

References to American strength and ability to overcome shortcomings combated the anti-NAFTA advertisements' portrayal of lower Mexican standards for environmental and labor regulations. In other words, the American Leadership myth counteracted the Isolationism myth deployed by the anti-NAFTA advertisements. The pro-NAFTA advertisements promoted the American ability to compete and win and not to give in to fear and hence retreat. Arguments against retreating were highlighted with analogies to the Great Depression, as demonstrated in the following advertisement:

1930—We stand alone. High tariffs. Smoot Hawley. Isolationism. Americans for Americans. We trade with few. No one trades with us. [This] Equals the Great Depression. 1993—ABB considers NAFTA to be essential to the success of our economy and the economy of the world. It's one step forward. ("The History," 1993:B2)<sup>14</sup>

Facing the future and turning away from fear were common references of the American Leadership myth. One advertisement declared:

In the end, NAFTA is about facing the future with confidence—about believing that Americans can still compete and win, about expanding our horizons and seizing the opportunity of growing our economy through increasing our exports. NAFTA because America can win. ("NAFTA. Controversial Today," 1993:A19)

Another stated,

Remember, what's right for America will always encounter opposition from those who are frightened by change. This opposition must be answered by all of us who care about the future. Make no mistake about it. We are all in this global economy together. Let's show, once again, that we have the courage to do what's right and support NAFTA with everything we've got. Now is the time for leadership. ("The Courage," 1993:A21)

By evoking the American Leadership myth, many NAFTA advertisements argued that while Mexico had problems, NAFTA would help overcome them. One advertisement argued that "NAFTA will encourage Mexico to adhere to strict environmental regulations" ("Why 300 Economists Support NAFTA," 1993:A31). Another stated,

Under the North American Free Trade Agreement—NAFTA—Mexico will become stronger economically, and have more resources to protect the environment and eliminate sources of pollution. . . . NAFTA is a good deal for everyone who cares about the environment—and for the trees, rivers and wildlife that are part of it. Let's get together with NAFTA. ("Mexico Today," 1993:A28)

<sup>14</sup> ABB was the name of the company that purchased the advertisement.

American Leadership, as a branch of American Exceptionalism, evokes feelings of pride and optimism in the ability of America to move forward toward a more positive future. Using this myth to generate support for NAFTA allowed the pro-NAFTA campaign to counter the opposition's portrayal of Mexico without directly countering their claims of poorer conditions. The pro-NAFTA campaign did not attempt to persuade the public that Mexico did not actually have the problems that the opposition claimed, but rather relied on the American Leadership myth to convince the public that despite some problems with the trade accord and in Mexico, America could succeed and win. The use of the American Leadership myth demonstrates how myths sought to construct a positive self-image for America and a discourse about NAFTA that overcame, rather than displaced, the dependent image of Mexico.

### *Isolationism*

Isolationism is the second branch of the American Exceptionalism myth. It is juxtaposed with the corresponding branch, American Leadership, and refers to America's vulnerability if exposed to corrupt political systems and the need to protect the prosperity of Americans from outside forces. Isolationism was the anti-NAFTA campaign's main myth and was coded eleven times, or 37 percent of the total myths referenced by this side of the campaign. Isolationism was not used at all by the pro-NAFTA advertisements. The anti-NAFTA advertisements warned of high costs to taxpayers due to the environmental cost of NAFTA and of the flight of jobs to Mexico so that corporations could take advantage of cheap labor and lower regulation. For example, this advertisement stated:

NAFTA: Who Wins? Who Loses? Taxpayers lose. NAFTA will cost \$20 billion or more in lost revenue and for the cost of border cleanup and U.S. unemployment. It will take a tax increase to pay for NAFTA. . . . U.S. corporations will expand in Mexico, not at home. And American workers will be forced to compete with workers making just a dollar an hour. ("NAFTA: Who Wins?" 1993:A20)

Another anti-NAFTA advertisement declared:

Promoted as a boon for all of us, the true purpose of NAFTA is to help large corporations increase their profits. NAFTA does this by undermining laws and standards (in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico) that inhibit uncontrolled corporate freedoms. . . . Freedom to set poor working conditions and keep wages low. ("Eight Fatal," 1993:A29)

Concern that poor conditions in Mexico could detrimentally affect the U.S. was a theme also coded under Isolationism. In a supplemental anti-NAFTA advertising section, Representative David Bonior was quoted as saying,

Anyone concerned about the lives and futures of American, Canadian or Mexican workers should not ignore the reality of Mexico's policies today. NAFTA will lock in the status quo—accelerating economic damage to both Mexico and the U.S. Our future is linked with the future of the people of Mexico. But we must be on the side of those fighting for democratic reform and a decent living standard—not on the side of the status quo. ("NAFTA No!" 1993:A18)

Environmental degradation was also a dominant theme of the anti-NAFTA advertisements. One advertisement stated, "Does Mexican President Carlos Salinas honor his environmental promises? If 'free' trade means the extinction of gentle giant sea turtles, you can imagine what other environmental horrors lie in



wait for animals and human beings alike" ("Does Mexican President," 1993:B7). Another advertisement proclaimed,

NAFTA's an environmental loser. NAFTA's opponents argue that while Mexico has strict environmental laws, they are rarely enforced. Problem is—Mexico lacks the resources to be an equal and responsible partner with the U.S. and Canada. In 1991, for example, America's per capita spending for environmental protection was 132 times as much as Mexico's." ("NAFTA No!" 1993:A18)

The anti-NAFTA advertisements also argued that NAFTA would lower, not raise, U.S. living standards. "Americans will be forced to accept lower wages and a lower standard of living. The fact is NAFTA will put even more pressure on Americans to compete against workers in Mexico who are paid as little as \$6 a day" ("It's Time to Tell," 1993:A28). Therefore, Isolationism, as the main myth of the anti-NAFTA advertisements, portrayed NAFTA as devastating the lives of American workers. Drawing on the already existing negative image of Mexico, the Isolationism myth accentuated the fears of Americans and portrayed a grim picture of the future if NAFTA succeeded.

The Isolationism myth complemented perfectly the already existing negative image of Mexico held in the U.S. By relying heavily on this myth, the anti-NAFTA advertisements intended to provide access to this embedded image and therefore maintain the *impossibility* of an equal trading relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Isolationism further ingrained and circulated the image of Mexico as weak, dependent, and corrupt.

### *Populism*

The advertisements coded under the Populism myth emphasized the lack of democracy in the NAFTA negotiations; the possibility that NAFTA would threaten the democratic process; and the role of corporations, special interest lobbies, and foreign money on the NAFTA campaign. Both pro- and anti-NAFTA advertisements often evoked Populism to dramatize the effects of NAFTA. It made up 25 percent of the total references, second only to American Dream, but was more often used by the anti-NAFTA side totaling 34 percent of the myths used in these advertisements, the second most frequently used myth.

Corporations and elites versus the people was a theme that evoked the Populism myth often in the anti-NAFTA advertisements. The following advertisements exemplify this: "NAFTA will seriously stifle representative democracy by making local, state or national laws subject to an unelected NAFTA bureaucracy that citizens cannot control" ("Eight Fatal," 1993:A19). According to another advertisement, "The big corporations and Mexican lobbyists tell us NAFTA won't threaten U.S. jobs and wages. But that's not what they tell each other. They tell each other the truth" ("Big Corporations and Lobbyists," 1993:A18).

Some anti-NAFTA advertisements coded under Populism warned of the loss of sovereignty under NAFTA. "[NAFTA] will place our trade laws under the foreign control of panels of international lawyers" ("NAFTA No!" 1993:A19). One advertisement stated,

NAFTA weakens U.S. sovereignty. Opponents maintain that NAFTA would weaken U.S. sovereignty by permitting labor and environmental disputes to be decided by bi-national review panels—effectively countermanning decisions by the U.S. Congress and U.S. courts. ("NAFTA No!" 1993:A18)

Pro-NAFTA advertisements evoked the Populism myth when they referred to "special interest" groups. For example, one declared,

Citibank stands behind NAFTA. We believe it is the key to the future economic success of the United States. And that's crucial to us, because as your prosperity grows, so does ours. But special interest groups are lined up against NAFTA, seriously threatening its passage in Congress." ("Presidents Support NAFTA," 1993:A6)

When used by the anti-NAFTA advertisements and Perot, the Populism myth effectively rallied labor unions and promoted a sense of urgency about NAFTA for the working American. This myth carried the anti-NAFTA campaign's position home to workers and played on the distrust of the government held by many Americans.

The Populism myth upheld the negative image of Mexico when used by the anti-NAFTA advertisements when they emphasized the possibility of weakening democracy in the U.S. and loss of sovereignty due to the political corruption and faulty political system in Mexico. The pro-NAFTA advertisements never countered these claims, but instead evoked the myth to draw attention to the threatened democratic process in the U.S. caused by intense lobbying. Therefore the actual image of Mexico as a weak and inferior country remained unchanged.

When applying Lotz's definitions of myths used in representing NAFTA, it is clear that the same myths used by Gore and Perot were also used in promoting NAFTA. Myths played a substantial role in constructing NAFTA for the American public and these distinct representations came to define and enable the debate in the U.S. While myths circulated throughout the contested NAFTA discourses, the pro-NAFTA discourse that employed myths emphasizing the positive attributes of the U.S. overpowered and gained wider acceptance than the anti-NAFTA discourse. Congress and the U.S. public more readily believed in a strong U.S. national identity that became associated with the American Dream and American Leadership myths. This positive identity allowed the acceptance of Mexico as an inferior other and a viable and valuable equal trading partner. By emphasizing U.S. identity rather than attempting to alter Mexico's negative image, the pro-NAFTA discourse trumped the alternative myths circulated by the anti-NAFTA campaign. However, in all representations of NAFTA, there was a distinct interplay between the use of myths and the image of Mexico. It is clear from the examination of the myths used in advertising NAFTA that underlying the contested discourses was this long-standing negative image.

### Image and Myth in NAFTA Advertisements

The Isolationism and Populism myths by the anti-NAFTA advertisements effectively perpetuated and relied on the established image of Mexico, as a low-wage, socially troubled, environmentally polluted country that exports illegal aliens to establish reasons for rejecting NAFTA. It seems logical that the *anti-NAFTA* campaign would rely on this negative image to remind the U.S. public just how *impossible* the passage of NAFTA should be. To demonstrate that the U.S. image of Mexico remained unchanged, the pro-NAFTA advertisements must be analyzed to show how those who were advocating equal partnership portrayed Mexico. Did the pro-NAFTA advertisements address the shortcomings of Mexico championed by the opposition thereby transforming the previously held image? Did these advertisements portray Mexico more positively than as a low-wage, inferior, weak, socially troubled, environmentally polluted country that exports illegal aliens to the U.S.?

These questions can be partially answered by the above discussion on the use of the American Leadership myth by the pro-NAFTA advertisements. This myth and the examples taken from the advertisements themselves demonstrate how the pro-NAFTA advertisements depended on references to America's ability to

lead and overcome adversity to rise above Mexico's shortcomings. As stated above, this myth was primarily used to counter the claims of the opposition, not with a more positive portrayal of Mexico, but with a myth that alluded to America's ability to elevate Mexico's environmental standards. For example, Kathryn Fuller, president of the World Wildlife Fund, said in one advertisement:

If NAFTA fails, we will have missed a critical environmental opportunity. Foreign investment in Mexico is sure to continue to grow regardless of what happens to NAFTA, but the opportunity and the means to help control and guide such investment to the benefit of the North American environment will be largely lost. ("NAFTA Yes!" 1993:B3)

In other words, without the U.S., Mexico's inferior environmental standards and regulation would remain the same.

There were two dominant themes found in the pro-NAFTA advertisements that fit into the previously defined image of Mexico. The first theme recapitulated Mexico's weakness, inferiority, and inability to threaten U.S. workers and the second theme raised the issue of illegal immigration and NAFTA's ability to stem its flow from Mexico. Both these themes maintained the established image rather than attempting to re-create it.

In arguing for support of NAFTA, many advertisements ridiculed the anti-NAFTA opposition's use of fear of job loss by lambasting Mexico's ability to threaten U.S. workers. One advertisement stated:

Concern about wage differences miss the key point that other factors—higher U.S. productivity (currently six times that of Mexico), the *skill of the workforce*, access to high-quality transport and other infrastructure . . . and a *reliable government and judicial system*—are also crucial in business decisions. The image of droves of U.S. corporations heading to Mexico just doesn't make sense when these other considerations are taken into account. *More and more U.S. firms that tried relocating to Mexico have learned the hard way and have come back home* [emphasis added]. ("Supporting NAFTA," 1993:D14)

Another advertisement countered the NAFTA opposition's arguments by focusing on America's genuine economic competition and threat:

Most NAFTA opposition is driven by fear. Fear of change, fear of the new economy, fear of the unknown. . . . The fact is, our real competitors are in Western Europe and the Pacific Rim, not in Mexico. Blaming our economic troubles on Mexico is like blaming the Midwest floods on a leaky faucet in Minneapolis. ("NAFTA Yes!" 1993:B5)

In other words, Mexico was depicted by pro-NAFTA advertisements as inferior to and not of equal stature with the U.S. and other developed countries. One final example of how the pro-NAFTA advertisements pitted the strength of the U.S. against the weakness and inferiority of Mexico makes the point: "U.S. workers have skills and talents and training that have no match in Mexico. . . . *The anti-NAFTA lobby insults U.S. workers by saying they cannot compete with lower-paid Mexican workers* [emphasis added]" ("NAFTA Yes!" 1993:B6). President Clinton echoed these remarks in a public statement when he declared that "only someone who was 'nuts' would say that America could not win in a head to head competition with Mexico" (Friedman, 1993:B9). These examples taken from pro-NAFTA advertisements demonstrate that the negative image of Mexico as weak, inferior, and low-wage remained intact even in the representations offered by those that argued for equal economic partnership. Mexico remained an inferior

counterpart to the U.S. and therefore, it was argued, a strong and competent American workforce would have no trouble succeeding under NAFTA.

The second theme that reinforced this negative image was the often-repeated issue of illegal immigration. Again, in looking solely at the pro-NAFTA advertisements, 40 percent referenced illegal immigration from Mexico in representing NAFTA. This contributed to the image of Mexico exporting illegal aliens to the U.S. President Clinton publicly warned that rejecting NAFTA would result in a flood of illegal immigrants (Marcus and Behr, 1993:A16). Pro-NAFTA advertisements supported Clinton's position and argued that passing NAFTA would help ease illegal immigration. These representations of NAFTA maintained the existing negative image of Mexico while simultaneously supporting America's ability to positively influence its southern neighbor through the trade accord. One advertisement argued, "By strengthening the Mexican as well as the American economy, NAFTA will decrease Mexican unemployment, which is the leading cause of illegal immigration into the United States" ("For Once," 1993:A45). Another declared, "NAFTA. A Trade Agreement that: Takes the first real step in stemming the tide of illegal immigration into the U.S. by stabilizing the Mexican economy" ("What Do These Presidents," 1993:A4). These are a few of the many examples of how the issue of illegal immigration appeared in advertising NAFTA.

Examining the pro-NAFTA advertisements demonstrates that the long-standing negative image of Mexico remained very much the same as defined by Martha Cottam and found by the Mexican NAFTA lobby. A change in image did not take place to allow the passage of NAFTA. NAFTA succeeded despite this negative image, and this image was actually used to the benefit of both the pro- and anti-NAFTA advertisements. The anti-NAFTA advertisements relied on repeating this image to dissuade the American public, while the pro-NAFTA advertisements utilized the negative image to quell fear of competition and to embellish the self-image of the U.S. as strong and powerful and able to overcome deficiencies. The pro-NAFTA advertisements contributed to a dominant NAFTA discourse that relied on the use of the American Dream and American Leadership myths to construct NAFTA as a very real and necessary possibility.

### Conclusion

The passage of NAFTA by the U.S. House of Representatives on November 17, 1993, became a possibility through a discursive construction of the trade accord that represented it to the American public as an extension of preexisting American myths. A dominant NAFTA discourse emerged during the three-month public debate that reemphasized the U.S. self-image as one of strength, leadership, and an embodiment of the American Dream of a prosperous future. As an extension of a positive U.S. self-image, the NAFTA discourse overpowered the reigning negative image of Mexico without challenging the ingrained perception. Moreover, this negative image was actually utilized by the pro- and anti-NAFTA sides to argue each position. The dominant NAFTA discourse did not attempt to transform the image of Mexico, but relied on representational elements to create the *possibility* of NAFTA for the U.S. public despite the negative image held by the U.S. The NAFTA discourse allowed the simultaneous existence of both the possibility of economic integration with Mexico as an equal partner and the established image of Mexico as a dependent *other*.

This article demonstrates how American myths were used throughout the entire NAFTA discourse and argues that a circulation of myths prior to the Gore/Perot debate created a framework for the representations presented in that singular event. A specific set of American myths was used to construct NAFTA and these same myths existed in multiple forums that came to define, enable, and constrain the NAFTA debate in the U.S. For the majority of the U.S. public,

NAFTA represented a choice between the politics of fear or hope, a “giant sucking sound” or a prosperous future for America’s children, a retreat from change or a belief that America can win, rather than a trade accord that lowered tariffs among three countries. Therefore, how policy is represented to the public actually has a powerful effect on its ability to succeed in Congress.

Subsequently uninteresting as a trade accord, NAFTA became important to the average American when it was attached to the American Dream and the American Leadership myths in the same way that it gained urgency when represented under the Isolationism and Populism myths. Myths, representation, and the discourses that embed them therefore influence and make U.S. foreign policy possible. Understanding how policy is constructed by these elements is an important and necessary requirement for foreign policy analysis. Myths and representations not only constructed and made NAFTA possible, but continue to influence and enable policy today. Therefore, while sometimes overlooked by conventional scholars, analysis into the discursive construction of U.S. foreign policy warrants further academic investigation.

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