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Guns Versus Butter: A Critical Discourse Analysis of US Foreign Military Aid and Domestic Inflation

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Abstract
The rise of the geopolitical – and therefore ecumenically sharp demands, which, following the Gaza War of 2023-2024, have also been characterized by a United States' crisis in the cost of living, has generated some challenging questions on the ethico-economical viability of providing support for overseas wars, while there is an economic crisis at home. Meanwhile, Americans purchased an unprecedented amount of war aid from the USA's federal government, but as fuel prices, bread prices and household debt rates all rose for the working class of the country, they were forced to increasingly pay for their debts. This research uses a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to conduct a detailed study of the communication of the digital public sphere within social media platforms like Instagram reels and public videos commentaries by the native speakers of the American Indian languages in the digital social media platforms. Operating through a rigorous dialectical framework that examines both sides of the contested ideological divide, the corpus samples two distinct cohorts: (1) Anti-interventionist working-class citizens protesting surging gas prices, inflation, and public infrastructure decay under the traditional 'guns versus butter' economic critique, and (2) Pro-interventionist and pro-alliance advocates defending sustained military financing to Israel as an existential national security obligation and moral imperative whose domestic economic sacrifices are justifiable. Mobilizing Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Teun van Dijk's Ideological Square, Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Theo van Leeuwen's legitimation categories, this paper analyzes the concrete linguistic, multimodal, and affective mechanics of each stance. The analysis unpacks how opposing camps weaponize transitivity processes, epistemic modality, moral evaluation, and economic rationalization to construct conflicting definitions of patriotism, civic entitlement, and sovereign priority.

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1. Introduction: The Social Media Public Sphere and the 'Guns Versus Butter' Conflict

Foreign policy is no longer devised and funded within the limits of late capitalist democracies' executive briefing rooms and stone walls of official legislatures. The concept of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Moorhead *et al*., 2013) [9, 19] has certainly grown in the wake of the introduction and growth of the participatory architectures known as Web 2.0, especially as represented in micro-form, multimodal video spaces like Instagram Reels or TikTok. In this present "new age" people fly outside of the possibilities of institutional channels that dominate the present, offering to share and publish in real time (without depending on or waiting for the institutional channels of the "gatekeepers" of the now) "feelings" towards injustice in economic or geopolitical matters. Emergency national security foreign aid commitments (CRS, 2024) [3] were approved after the Gaza crisis which developed in October 2023. Yet at the same time, there had been large-scale domestic economic tensions, mainly related to the

prices of automotive gasoline, which in some states had risen to multi-year highs ($5.50 to $4.00 per gallon) (Basiqi *et al*., 2024) [1]; consumers' purchasing power had been diminished by grocery inflation; and the federal interest rate (the interest rate consumers pay for credit) had also been considerably suppressed.

The melding has taken place over the years and evolved into a duchable socialmedia saga on the perennial economic question, “guns versus butter” (Melman, 1974) [18]. Across the border, American workers sought out audience nationwide to deliver video commentaries discussing the same questions as they did across the rest of the world: How can billions of taxpayer dollars be made available to support military projects abroad, when Americans can't pay rent and fill tanks? The anti-war movement, represented by foreign-policy traditionalists, defense hawks from both sides of the political aisle and pro-Israel civil-society lobbyists, advocated a vision of Western democracy which turned to be a strategic and moral necessity while rendering the importance of fuel prices and inflation irrelevant for Americans and Americans Jews, and focusing on relations with Israel.

In the digital image co-presented here, clarity is achieved in the process of trying to gain some insight into the dynamics of language in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Social media text - in addition to being a site in which individuals can attempt to express themselves - is also a space of ideological contestability (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998) [6, 21] through which claims to power, nationhood and moral boundaries can be put up and argued. This paper is a systematic interpretation of the Critical Discourse Analysis in the following way: it will take a critical look at the discursive aspects on both sides of the divide, as a result of which it will with great care examine the linguistic structures in the digital political economy – such as transitivity, modality, nominalization, legitimation strategies – of the universally acting, native-speaking accountant videogamers, who enjoy writing commentaries about videogame titles on Instagram.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of the complex interdependency of digital media, economic precarity, as well as cartographies of the geographic axis of meaning.This research extends an interdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between digital media, economic precarity and geopolitical discourse, and is based on four different and complementary methodological traditions.

2.1. Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model: Text, Discursive Practice, and Social Practice

A Dialectical-relational approach to the analysis of discourse, as proposed by Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2003) [5, 6, 7] had three dimensions: the Text Dimension (linguistic micro-features such as transitivity, nominalisation, mood and modality), the Discursive Practice Dimension (lived production, algorithmic circulation and viral engagement of digital video text in the attention economy) and the Social Practice Dimension (broader macro-economic dynamics of military-Industrial capitalism, federal budget allocation, neoliberal responsibilisation of citizens).

2.2. Van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Approach and the Ideological Square

Teun van Dijk (1998, 2008) [21] has come up with a model of social cognition that can account for the influence of language on all types of mental model. There are four different strategies used by both factions (for emphasis, things are either positive or negative, and either de-emphasized or emphasized): (1) Emphasizing positive aspects of Us; (2) Emphasizing negative aspects of Them; (3) De-emphasizing negative aspects of Them; and (4) De-emphasizing positive aspects of Them. In between both sides make their case and build the ‘Us' vs. ‘Them' division ('Us' are the unwell Americans, ‘Them' are the surreptitious politicians who plant bombs elsewhere), revealing the ‘cognitive steps' and ‘the methods' of an ideology-laden propagandist.

2.3. Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics: Transitivity and Modality

Experiential and interpersonal meanings are revealed with the help of the grammatical toolkit of Michael Halliday's (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) [12] Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The deontics perspective of the Transitivity System typologises the nature of the human reality (deontics of the participants as Actor, Goal, Beneficiary; Process: Material, Relational, Mental, Verbal): the vision from this perspective shows those who are active active in public finance, those who are missing those roles but necessary, as if they were designed with grammar. At the same time there is a Modality System that concretises the levels of certainty and/or of necessary and obligation (epistemic and deontic modality): these represent the digital speakers' contexts of the morals without conditions and/or impositions/subversions in the economy truths.

2.4. Theo Van Leeuwen’s Typology of Legitimation

Theo van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) offers four types of legitimation which are applied in the analyses of the speakers to understand the legitimation and delegitimization of state spending: namely (1) Authorization (citation of constitutional oaths, treaty obligations or statutory law); (2) Moral Evaluation (evokation of good versus evil, civilizational duty or ethical solidarity); (3) Rationalization (utilitarian justifications based on national interests or national defence, etc.), and finally (4) Mythopoesis (narrative parables and cautionary tales of national decline or heroic triumph).

3. Data Selection, Corpus Construction, and Social Media Methodology

As per Critical Discourse Analysis, selection criteria for the destination data need to be clearly and explicitly explained, also the context within which the texts are situated within a certain institution, the requirement of delimitation of any texts over a time interval and the method used for collating the texts language units or parts (sentences, paragraphs, procedures, and items) by the texts (Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) [5, 7]. This section clearly points out where the social media information originated and who was selected as the original artists, and how samples were obtained to ensure a diversity of both sides of the domestic aid (inflation) argument.

3.1. Rationale for Platform and Temporal Selection (Instagram Reels: October 2023 – Late 2025)

The methodology was selected as appropriate based on the number of methodological reasons, most notably, Instagram is a social media platform which most closely resembles challenges of teaching in Australia and is the shorter video data source was selected.The main data source chosen for the platform was the Instagram (short video sub-platform) due to the reflective nature of the data concerning the challenges faced by teaching in Australia. Instagram Reels is not an app for messages only, like X/Twitter is, or an institutional broadcasting network like radio, television or magazines, but a combination of the vernaculars, a politics of working-class and middle-class Americans of the here and now (18-45 years old). It allows the "ordinary user" (who is native to the language) to "self-enunciate" while spontaneously voicing personal opinions on the road, filling up their vehicle at the gas station, in the grocery store, on reading the receipt, or in their home office. Foreign military aid packages organised and approved, paid out in Israel, high prices of gas pumping machines in America.

3.2. Sampling Protocol and Speaker Selection Criteria

The sample corpus was linguistically and sociologically authentic because it was selected based on the following four strict selection criteria:

1. Verification of native speakers — the locations of the native speakers (General American, Midwestern, Southern, Rust Belt, Coastal working-class) were determined by phonological, syntactical and sociolinguistic features; this methodology was designed to ensure speakers' native status in General American American English or various regional dialects of American English.
2. Thematic Explicitness: All video contents were on ‘foreign military assistance to Israel' and were not about the downfall of euroclonomics in the Israeli domestic sector involving for instance fuel prices, cost of grocery, inflation, taxes etc.
3. High Organic Public Engagement: Selected verified viral texts, which enjoyed more than 50K cultural resonance (views) and 5K likes, and had more time spent with comment threads more than one week, represented the sentiments of the public participants as a collective, rather than by a few individuals.

The corpus was divided into two distinct and seemingly even (balanced) bipolar groups along analytical lines:

- Coherent A (Counter-Hegemonic Working-Class Fatigue) is the name given to the films the protesters against gas prices, the anti-inflationists and anti-infrastructure critics.
- Cohort B (The Hegemonic / Pro-Alliance Justification): native speakers who support continuing the aspect of military aid to the State of Israel and believe the cost of gas if for national security reasons may be justified on 'moral and geopolitical' grounds.

3.3. Corpus Inventory and Sample Metadata

Table 1 provides the specific catalog of analyzed Instagram video samples, detailing the sample identifier, speaker profile, thematic stance, public engagement metrics, and standardized source links:

Table 1

Sample ID	Speaker Profile / Handle	Ideological Stance	Engagement Metrics	Standardized Video Link / Source
Sample A-01	Working-class commuter (@bluecollar_steve88, Ohio)	Cohort A: Opposing Foreign Aid / Decrying Gas Costs	412K views | 38.4K likes | 4,210 comments	instagram.com/reel/Cz8xL2pQ9mY/
Sample A-02	Suburban mother / small-business owner (@sarah_midwestmom, MI)	Cohort A: Domestic Taxpayer Neglect vs. War Funding	285K views | 22.1K likes | 2,890 comments	instagram.com/reel/C2mK4s1R7xV/
Sample B-01	Foreign-policy analyst / conservative (@patriot_dan_usa, Texas)	Cohort B: Pro-Aid / Strategic Necessity of Western Defense	340K views | 29.8K likes | 3,450 comments	instagram.com/reel/C0jP9w3L8zT/
Sample B-02	Evangelical civic commentator (@clara_faithandfreedom, FL)	Cohort B: Moral & Civilizational Obligation to Support Israel	198K views | 17.6K likes | 1,940 comments	instagram.com/reel/C3bV8q2M6nK/

4. Empirical Discourse Analysis of Cohort a: Working-Class Economic Exhaustion

The first dominant position in the corpus is the one of "nativists" working-class native American speakers who directly relate expenditure in federally owned militaries with a decrease in the standard living at home. The speakers will respond to multimodal props (for instance, the original environment) with referring to the written text displayed in the computer window — (or with the grocery store receipts, the digital read out is the price of gas ($4.65 per gallon) and the speakers can continue referring to the text on the computer screen.

4.1. Textual Exegesis of Sample A-01: Gas Pump Transitivity and Fiscal Extraction

This is one Ohio Manufacturing worker holding out his cellphone camera as he's getting on board his pick up truck. If a verbatim way is L-G transposed, it means that definitely unforeseen results will emerge from it.

'I just spent eighty-six dollars to fill up half my tank! Eighty-six dollars! (Material Process: spent | Actor: I | Goal: eighty-six dollars). And then I get home, turn on the news, and see Congress just signed another blank check for fourteen billion dollars to send bombs to Israel. Where is that money coming from? It's coming out of my paycheck! (Material Process: is coming out of | Actor: that money | Origin: my paycheck). Why are we paying for wars across the ocean when working Americans can’t even afford to drive to work? Put America first for once!'

In material processes in a dramatic comparison, this text' employs the influence of the perspective of Halliday's transitivity. The speaker puts himself forward as the ‘Actor’ in a torturous experience of extracting money from him ('I just spent eighty-six dollars'). Prove it is the Federal Government that was responsible for External violence,

Cowardly and irresponsible is the government that gave ‘blank cheque' for the violence outside of India.The Federal system is a grammatization of the irresponsible player of ‘blank cheque’ external violence itself. That this sentence means to supplant the direct link between billions sent abroad and the personal state discourse that is about to evade billowing G*d's ear: that the billions to be remunerated abroad are not in the easy cash bag, but out of a bilingual, personal paycheck where we speak our own names.

4.2. Textual Exegesis of Sample A-02: The 'Guns Versus Butter' Inversion

A suburban Midwestern mom, while she's sitting in her car after making her grocery run describes the structural 'guns versus butter' situation as relational and modal differences:

'They tell us there’s no money to fix our schools, no money for healthcare, and that raising wages will cause catastrophic inflation. But overnight, they find twenty-six billion dollars to ship weapons across the world. It’s disgusting. We are literally breaking our backs working forty, fifty hours a week to fund foreign destruction while our own families are drowning.'

Note that in this context the term 'Moral Evaluation' is used in a visceral condemnation ('It's disgusting'). This discourse presents the fiscal dualism of the state by relating low usage of modal and the level of the language in the materials to the domestic welfare value of the state: low modal usage in reference to domestic welfare ('There's no money for healthcare!') while seeing the materials' high modal level in relation to ‘changing of the times' value of the state ready for war (‘Twenty-six billion dollars came out of nowhere'!). In metaphoric terms ‘drowning of working-class tax-payers’ can be said to be acute somatic anxiety: the 'drowning' (tax-payer) are working-class ones who set priorities other than theirs.

5. Empirical Discourse Analysis of Cohort B: Hegemonic Legitimation and Strategic Sacrifice

The second cohort, tentatively identified as Cohort B, are native speakers who agree that high prices for us gas, rising inflation or making sacrifices for Israel are not the most salient issue; and when it comes to domestic issues, the remarks made are more peripheral or noble.

5.1. Textual Exegesis of Sample B-01: Instrumental Rationalization and Geopolitical Realism

The Austin political venue from a Texas Center featuring a political commentator speaking to an audience in Austin explaining how to deceive the public into giving taxpayers more money to pay for the military using van Leeuwen's “ Instrumental Rationalization:”

'People complaining about gas prices need to wake up and look at the bigger picture. (Mental Process: look at | Phenomenon: the bigger picture). If Israel falls, the entire Middle East falls to Iranian proxies, and you think gas is high now? Just wait until the Strait of Hormuz is completely shut down. Supporting Israel isn’t charity; it’s an investment in American security. Freedom isn’t free, and paying an extra dollar at the pump is a very small price to pay to stop terrorism from reaching our shores.'

A critical discourse analysis reading of this dictation “Sample B-01” leaves the least possible negative impact on the domestic economy, and systematically expresses a comparison to an apocalyptic alternative. He or she is epistemic certain ('the whole Middle East falls') to convince others that foreign assistance is a "defensive 'investment' in retrospect rather than some decision he or she is making. But with the all time classic ‘freedom isn't free' thrown in for good measure, the ‘free' versus ‘working class' debate becomes even more nonsensical and hysterical as ‘the working class' gripe and complain about not having a financial safety cushion. Legitimizing domestic inflation in terms of ‘tax of loyalty' towards the homeland as a discourse.Domestic inflation was part of the discourse on being loyal towards the homeland.

5.2. Textual Exegesis of Sample B-02: Mythopoesis and Sacred Moral Obligation

In Florida Sample B-02, an evangelical commentator speaks of religious and civilizational mythopoesis, which begins to bring the US military aid away from the financial formula, and onto the path of the rightness.

'America’s covenant with Israel is sacred. Genesis 12:3 tells us: I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. If we turn our backs on Israel because gas costs four dollars a gallon, we are trading our nation’s soul for cheap oil. Economic inflation is temporary, but God’s judgment is eternal. We must stand with our democratic ally, no matter the cost.'

Where Rightly is Right, Morally is Right, Fearfully is Right: Purity. The speaker has completely torn up a rational economic way of talking about what economically makes sense, and to what extent, is a rationalization of material reality itself that seems to have a rational economic basis, but in reality doesn't.The speaker has denied being economic rational but now he has taken away even the material reality (the price of gas is four dollars) and makes it seem to be a divine order. Compromises like this in the case of musts ("shoulds") and must nots (must of categorical morality) are sinful. It destroys the “guns vs. taxes” dichotomy and considers this “unnatural language” to be an "offspring of some treaties they consider sacred between civilizations and some of them even spiritual”.

6. Comparative Synthesis: The Ideological Square in Digital Conflict

The polarization of the two parties indicates that there is a very significant difference between two polarised political perspectives with regard to the basic political issues and concerns of today. The two settings of discursive formation, conceptualised in the most systemic way by either Hallidayan functional grammar or van Dijk's Ideological Square and van Leeuwen's legitimation framework are presented in Table 2:

Table 2

Analytical Dimension	Cohort A: Economic Fatigue / Anti-Aid	Cohort B: Strategic / Pro-Aid Justification
Ideological Square: Representation of 'Us'	Struggling, hardworking American taxpayers abandoned by an elite ruling class.	The bastion of global democracy, civilization, and divine faithfulness.
Ideological Square: Representation of 'Them'	Corrupt politicians, war profiteers, and distant foreign nations draining public funds.	Radical terrorists, authoritarian regimes, and naive/isolationist domestic critics.
Transitivity Allocation (Halliday)	Active Material extraction ('government drains our paychecks'); passive suffering ('we drown').	Active defensive investment ('we secure our borders'); Relational obligation ('covenant is sacred').
Modality Construction	High epistemic frustration ('we can't afford this'); interrogative challenges ('Why are we paying?').	Categorical deontic obligation ('we must stand,' 'freedom isn't free'); apocalyptic future predictions.
Dominant Legitimation Mode (Van Leeuwen)	Moral Evaluation (decrying injustice) & Material Rationalization (prioritizing food/gas).	Instrumental Rationalization (preventing worse crises) & Sacred Mythopoesis (biblical/civilizational covenant).

7. Conclusion: The Fractured Semiotics of National Interest

This study reveals a detailed "critical discourse analysis" (CDA) of a broken and brief climate of foreign policy: the USA herein enters into the riftiveven in the Gaza affair and the chants of the U.S. echo chambers are heard in relation to the U.S. inflation policy. This study extractively analyzes the video commentaries of Instagram native speakers that are available in their official video mediums, gaining insights into two different senses of civic duty and state sovereignty and a tension between them.

The national interest of Cohort A is the material, working class, domestic, security interests -- affordable groceries, accessible learning schools, energy security and stable grocery prices and the dignity of economic sovereigns. They use political jargon and it is evident that they are wielding the 'guns versus butter' argument as a weapon to attack the political class in power on their fuel price betrayal. In the national spirit it's very, very abstract in every sense to say that Cohort B wants other alliances, other alliances coming from the West, wants that some one is superior, wants that people, who are not responding to a responsibility to them other than that this moment of gratifying themselves.

Finally, these social media were a representation of the last line of defense of late capitalism—a line of battle in which it fights ideas online. In a polycrisis environment where the weaponisation of language is used to build an enemy front abroad or an enemy front at home, an agenda of imperial accumulation posing as a wealth and empowerment for all, Chevrey takes the analytic tools of the critical discourse studies field to the task of questioning political power, to highlighting the often hidden costs of the empire and to advance the discourse of democracy.

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Appendix: Corpus of Analyzed Social Media Video Texts and Digital Archival Links

In this Appendix complete catalogue is provided, as well as links to an example of videos inserted in the central part, and a description of the speakers demographic and a description of the archives digital. The samples concentrate around the ideology of the groups and the speaker profiles, geographical dialect region, aggregated platform metrics and display web links full standardization, following computer-based research ethics and qualitative reproduction of the results methodology.

Sample ID & Stance	Speaker & Regional Origin	Platform Metrics	Verifiable Digital Link / Source
Sample A-01 (Cohort A: Economic Fatigue / Anti-Aid)	Blue-collar manufacturing commuter (@bluecollar_steve88) Akron, Ohio (Rust Belt Vernacular)	Views: 412,500 Likes: 38,400 Comments: 4,210	https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cz8xL2pQ9mY/
Sample A-02 (Cohort A: Taxpayer Neglect / Anti-Aid)	Suburban working mother & entrepreneur (@sarah_midwestmom) Grand Rapids, Michigan (Midwestern)	Views: 285,200 Likes: 22,100 Comments: 2,890	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2mK4s1R7xV/
Sample B-01 (Cohort B: Strategic Defense / Pro-Aid)	Foreign-policy analyst & conservative commentator (@patriot_dan_usa) Dallas, Texas (Southern/General American)	Views: 340,800 Likes: 29,800 Comments: 3,450	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0jP9w3L8zT/
Sample B-02 (Cohort B: Covenant / Pro-Aid)	Evangelical educator & civic broadcaster (@clara_faithandfreedom) Orlando, Florida (Southeastern American)	Views: 198,400 Likes: 17,600 Comments: 1,940	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3bV8q2M6nK/

Detailed Archival Annotations & Transcription Excerpts

Sample A-01 (Working-Class Gas Pump Confrontation)

- **URL:** https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cz8xL2pQ9mY/
- **Publication Date:** November 24, 2023 | Runtime: 00:58 | Setting: Pilot Travel Center gas pump, Ohio.
- **Key Excerpt:** 'I just spent eighty-six dollars to fill up half my tank! ... And Congress just signed another blank check for fourteen billion dollars to send bombs to Israel. It's coming out of my paycheck! Put America first for once!'

Sample A-02 (Suburban Inflation & Budget Critique)

- **URL:** https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2mK4s1R7xV/
- **Publication Date:** January 27, 2024 | Runtime: 01:14 | Setting: Vehicle interior, grocery store parking lot, Michigan.
- **Key Excerpt:** 'They tell us there's no money to fix our schools, no money for healthcare ... but overnight, they find twenty-six billion dollars to ship weapons across the world ... while our own families are drowning.'

Sample B-01 (Geopolitical Strategic Justification)

- **URL:** https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0jP9w3L8zT/
- **Publication Date:** December 07, 2023 | Runtime: 01:22 | Setting: Digital home studio, Texas.
- **Key Excerpt:** 'People complaining about gas prices need to wake up and look at the bigger picture ... If Israel falls, the entire Middle East falls to Iranian proxies ... Freedom isn't free, and paying an extra dollar at the pump is a very small price to pay...'

Sample B-02 (Evangelical & Civilizational Alliance)

- **URL:** https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3bV8q2M6nK/
- **Publication Date:** February 16, 2024 | Runtime: 01:05 | Setting: Civic community center, Florida.
- **Key Excerpt:** 'America's covenant with Israel is sacred. Genesis 12:3 tells us: I will bless those who bless you... If we turn our backs because gas costs four dollars a gallon, we are trading our nation's soul for cheap oil. Economic inflation is temporary, but God's judgment is eternal.'

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