

LANGUAGE AND WAR: THE RHETORIC OF GEORGE W. BUSH

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In response to attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, George Bush stated in September 2001, “freedom and fear are at war” (“Address to a Joint Session”). This phrase indicates a pattern of language persistent in his speeches over the following three years, one that exploited conventional United States ideology and crippled rational opposition. Through reductive use of abstract terminology, Bush encouraged public support for a war of indeterminate targets and duration and acceptance of its implications: death of U.S. citizens and foreigners, suspension of certain civil liberties, high military expenses, and damage to international relations.

This paper attempts to demonstrate how the White House motivated U.S. public consent while simultaneously restricting the potential for open and rational debate. I analyze several presidential speeches delivered between September 2001 and May 2004 and examine interviews with Osama bin Laden to illustrate parallels between Bush’s and bin Laden’s strategic applications of language. Ultimately, I argue that because Bush had to appeal to an ideologically diverse U.S. population, he invoked an interpretive stance; rather than inviting logical consideration of merit and disadvantage, the war was presented through abstract language and within a framework of moral and cultural association. This strategy circumvented social variances and promoted social cohesion as his audience became bound through unifying principles. By drawing from and reiterating pre-existing notions of community and collective identification, Bush associated traditional values of the U.S. democratic ideal with his own agenda.

Abstraction

To suggest the significance of word choice, Kenneth Burke developed the phrase “terministic screen”: “even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (*Language* 45, emphasis in original). Language, thought, and experience are interpenetrated: they exert continual and circular mutual influence. Experience affects choice of language, while words influence beliefs and mediate perceptions of the world.

When on September 20, 2001 Bush declared, “enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country” (“Address to a Joint Session”), his use of the term “war” was highly significant. Conventionally, only nation-states have the legal authority to declare war, and in the history of the United States, it had previously been declared solely by Congress. Yet in this instance, the president made the decision unilaterally and as a response to a unique set of attacks on the U.S. by a group of individuals. Although not a formal declaration of war, the language with which he depicts the attacks set the stage for his future agenda by linking his cause with the term’s associated values. During times of war, fragmented elements of society forge a common bond as a nation directs its collective resources

against an enemy. Although “war” connotes for some U.S. residents massive suffering and contentious motives, this term resonates for others with positive human and national characteristics: unity, strength, courage, and personal sacrifice to greater ideals. Shared terminology reflects and reinforces values and perspectives and creates community.

Abstraction-based rhetoric has repercussions, and Burke provides a methodology for their analysis. *Godterms*, “names for the ultimates of motivation,” attempt to represent the essence of a principle or belief (*Grammar* 74). When inaccurately presented as self-justified, they may remain unquestioned. The godterms of Bush’s strategy are freedom and terror. By asserting that “freedom itself is under attack” (“Address to a Joint Session”), Bush applies the term freedom as an overarching frame of reference; he intentionally depicts a worldview through language that represses alternative perspectives. He consistently averts terms such as capitalism, free market, and free enterprise, as each was subsumed beneath the godterm freedom, avoiding potentially critical consideration of its economic motivation. By stating, “the attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world” (“President Holds”), Bush equates the World Trade Center and Pentagon with moral integrity.

Clustered beneath the word freedom are the Enlightenment concepts of civilization, reason, virtue, compassion, tolerance, and decency. U.S. cultural associations with “freedom” are engrained deep within the national psyche. They date back to the nation’s founding as a refuge for those facing religious persecution in England, to the War of Independence, and to frontier mentality. The U.S. constitution was written by individuals heavily influenced by Enlightenment values and valorizes rationality and individual rights, ideas which have found contemporary expression in demands for the right to self-defense, personal mobility, and freedom of speech. By enfolded his agenda under the godterm freedom, Bush equates his ideology with the nation’s mythic past and ensures public support for his cause. In contrast, Bush applies the word terrorism as an opposition that reduces complex factors into a single essence of distilled evil. He averts terms such as combatant, insurgent, or resistance fighter, as each would have encouraged a less sympathetic audience perspective.

Dialectical terms such as freedom and terrorism gain meaning by contrast with other dialectical terms; they may be contrasted variously, and any contrast will emphasize particular aspects of the principal term. While static and commonplace tropes are neither finished nor closed, through repeated use they become readily associated with particular ideas, and there is danger that they may therefore become suggestive of a natural, universal, and inevitable order of reality. Consider bin Laden’s use of “terrorism” in 1998: “Every state and every civilization and culture has to resort to terrorism under certain circumstances for the purpose of abolishing tyranny and corruption. . . . The terrorism we practice is of the commendable kind” (“Interview”). In contrast, Bush presents terrorism this way: “Our terrorist enemies have a vision that guides and explains all their varied acts of murder. . . . They seek the total control of every person, and mind, and soul. . . . It is a totalitarian political ideology, pursued with consuming zeal, and without conscience” (“President Outlines”). Such a representation of the enemy is impenetrable. Terror is equated with murder, barbarianism, and totalitarian fanaticism. It is of interest that Bush applies this term in an especially broad sense; he extends it to include not only attacks on civilians but on military targets, violating conventional definitions of war.

In May 2004, fourteen months after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Bush altered his language. He states, “the terrorists’ only influence is violence, and their only agenda is death. Our agenda, in con-

trast, is freedom and independence, security and prosperity for the Iraqi people” (“President Outlines”). Rather than contrasting freedom with tyranny, Bush applies violence as the opposition and thus addresses his immediate concern: a group of fighters rather than a dictatorial government. Here we see the strategic flexibility offered by abstract terms, for “freedom” serves as the standard against which any form of opposition may be measured. This was a tactic he had employed eight months before in a speech to the United Nations Assembly: “Those who murder and celebrate suicide reveal their contempt for life, itself” (“President Bush Addresses”). Freedom is associated with life itself, while the insurgents’ “only agenda is death.” Freedom becomes more alluring, indeed vital, when equated with the essence of life itself.

Good and Evil

In a now famous ultimatum, nine days after the events of September 11th, Bush demanded of international world leaders, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address to a Joint Session”). Not surprisingly, the tendency to depict the world in terms of absolute good and evil corresponds precisely with the rhetorical strategy of Osama bin Laden. Bush invokes God’s favor: “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (“Address to a Joint Session”). And bin Laden echoes this claim: “Thanks to God, he who God guides will never lose. And I believe that there’s only one God” (“In Osama bin Laden’s Own Words”).

Through deliberate language, Bush constructs a binary of good versus evil, a struggle between deeply held values and their antitheses. Bush personifies the U.S. as a flawless, rational, and virtuous agent acting against its desires and strictly out of necessity. He has only these words as an answer for why the attacks had taken place: “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what they see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. . . . They hate our freedoms” (“Address to a Joint Session”). No acknowledgement of the situation’s complexity is entertained, for the enemy is evil strictly for evil’s sake. In contrast, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, conscious of the Canadian public’s aversion to the Iraqi invasion and owing to his government’s platform of minimal participation, acknowledges complexity: “By engaging in dialogue about issues that create the conditions of terrorism, we are not justifying it. We are acknowledging that terrorist acts emerge from a complex web of hatred and extremism.”

Emphasizing the good versus evil dichotomy, Bush depicts the U.S. as global representative of humanity’s most noble traits and aspirations:

[I]n our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom – the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time – now depends on us. Our nation, this generation will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. (“Address to a Joint Session”)

Contrasting such principled integrity with the enemy’s lack of ethics or reason, he states: “We’ve also seen images of a young American facing decapitation. This vile display shows a contempt for all the rules of warfare, and all the bounds of civilized behavior. It reveals a fanaticism that was not caused by any action of ours, and would not be appeased by any concession” (“President Outlines”).

Decapitation is a powerful symbol, but there is no logical distinction between executing people with bullets and bombs or with swords. Yet Bush asserts that the U.S. military killed in “one of the swiftest and most humane military campaigns in history” (“President Addresses”).

This depiction of the U.S. as blessed nation echoes precisely the tactics employed by bin Laden. He too claims moral superiority and portrays his cause as a unifying, virtuous assignment: “We have been entrusted with good cause to follow in the footsteps of the Messenger and to communicate his message to all nations. It is an invitation that we extend to all the nations to embrace Islam, the religion that calls for justice, mercy and fraternity among all nations” (“Interview”). By declaring that al Qaeda’s mission enjoyed divine moral authority, bin Laden mirrors Bush’s assertion that “[t]he advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us” (“Address to a Joint Session”). Further, by associating his cause with “justice, mercy and fraternity,” bin Laden parallels Bush’s tactic of favorable association. Both men relate their policies to virtuous conduct and ideals; while Bush associates justice with liberal democracy, bin Laden equates it with Islam.

Thus the Abu Ghraib prison scandal posed a severe threat to Bush’s authority. Televised images of U.S. soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners threatened to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. governmental policy, so Bush appropriates the prison as a symbol to bolster that policy. In May 2004, Bush states:

Under the dictator, prisons like Abu Ghraib were symbols of death and torture. That same prison became a symbol of disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values. America will fund the construction of a modern, maximum-security prison. . . . [W]e will demolish the Abu Ghraib prison, as a fitting symbol of Iraq’s new beginning. (“President Outlines”)

With these words, Bush attempts to disassociate Abu Ghraib prison from the U.S. government and to re-associate it with the enemy. His first reference is to Saddam Hussein, a “dictator” who employed “death” and “torture,” before the concession that a renegade minority of U.S. soldiers had acted against their own nation’s values. Finally, as a naked acknowledgement of symbolism’s potency, Bush declares the U.S. government’s intention to destroy the prison “as a fitting symbol of Iraq’s new beginning.” Bush attempts to reinterpret the situation and portrays the U.S. military once more as liberators representative of human virtue and decency.

Sacrificing Democracy

Democratic society’s protection of freedom of speech and expression served as justification for the declared war on terror. Therefore, Bush’s deliberate repression and evasion of open dialogue and debate was a threat to the very institutions it alleged to uphold. He was aware of the dangers of such dialogue; logical considerations threatened to undermine public support for governmental policy. Thus, while he at times equates his government’s moral superiority with rational agency—“our actions have been focused and deliberate and proportionate to the offense” (“President Bush Announces”)—such appeals to rationality most often give way to pathos. For example, stating the futility of debate or negotiation, Bush presents the argument to invade Iraq as the only rational available option: “America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the

final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud” (“President Bush Outlines”).

Bush consistently encourages such fear in the U.S. public. Consider his statement, “Today, the Justice Department did issue a blanket alert. It was in recognition of a general threat we received” (“President Holds”). No practical advice and no specific details are offered. The U.S. public is simply advised to be afraid, for a vague and shadowed threat was omnipresent and clawing at the doors of virtue and decency. The audience’s invoked stance encourages anger against “the enemy” and total faith in their president, who stands between them and catastrophe. Add to this an emphasis on worst-case scenarios: “we have every reason to assume the worst, and we have an urgent duty to prevent the worst from occurring” (“President Bush Outlines”). Citizens are encouraged to perceive themselves as helpless and vulnerable in the face of a pervasive though intangible threat.

This tactic was reinforced by a corresponding celebration of patriotism. Patriotism’s major casualty is the capacity for dialogue; only one language is available, and within this language it is impossible to express dissent. Freedom of speech was superseded by the demand for collective identification. In May 2003, Bush addresses the U.S. military with the words, “All of you—all in this generation of our military—have taken up the highest calling in history” (“President Bush Announces”). The phrase “highest calling in history” demonstrates no causal link with the supposed Iraqi threat but a revered idea. Further, these words associate the U.S. military with the priesthood: U.S. soldiers are thus essentially granted the status of holy warriors, a representation that parallels bin Laden’s celebration of Muslim fighters: “Allah has ordered us to make holy wars” (“Interview”). Shortly after the events of September 11, Bush spoke at a prayer service in the Episcopal National Cathedral. He declares, “We have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice. . . . A beloved priest died giving the last rites to a firefighter. . . . In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America because we are freedom’s home and defender” (“Address at the Episcopal”). Anyone contesting this course of action would be automatically associated with decayed morality. He appropriates a striking and potent image of human goodness and love. Firefighters were regarded as heroes during the aftermath of September 11th, and priests are symbols of Christianity’s highest values. In contrast, Bush describes the enemy as “the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism” (“Address to a Joint Session”). Owing to Bush’s assertion that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address to a Joint Session”), challenges to White House policy did not indicate a healthy and functioning democracy; they were a national threat.

The principal danger of Bush’s rhetoric stems from the distortion and manipulation of conventional values. To restrict potential for rational debate, Bush presents a thoroughly reductive portrayal of relevant issues. It is significant that this world representation coincides with the rhetorical strategy of its principal enemy, Osama bin Laden, illuminating both its effectiveness and threat. When Bush speaks of freedom, he implies a very particular set of values. Before accepting Bush’s words at face value, given his preference for abstraction over logic, it is vital to consider their transparent implications. Such critical thought ensures the vitality of democracy’s fundamental principles. The alternative is death to free and open dialogue.

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