

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

ON FREEDOM AND TERROR: THE WAR RHETORIC OF GEORGE W. BUSH EXAMINED IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Appearing before a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, just days after the horrendous attacks of September 11, President George W. Bush comforted the American people for their loss and beseeched them to uphold the values of America while remaining calm and resolute in the face of a continuing threat. In one of the most eloquent moments of his presidency, President Bush sought to rally the American people to the cause of justice and liberty by proclaiming:

Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered a great loss. And in 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. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.

In his article “Language and War: The Rhetoric of George W. Bush” in *Young Scholars in Writing*, Patrick W. Belanger criticizes President Bush for using rhetoric in his September 20, 2001, address that “exploited conventional United States ideology and crippled rational opposition” while mimicking “strategic applications of language” used by Osama Bin Laden (24). He sternly censures President Bush for invoking the protection of divine providence in a time of crisis and for establishing the terminology of justification in the abstract so that it would remain unquestioned. Further denouncing the president’s oratorical devices, Belanger opines that President Bush’s juxtaposition of the principled integrity of America with the enemy’s lack of ethics or reason fails to fully demonstrate the complexities of the situation.

Although his analysis of the “Godterms” or ultimate motivators such as “freedom” and “terror” used by President Bush to appeal to an ideologically diverse constituency is insightful, Belanger’s critiques show a lack of historical perspective. Many of the rhetorical mechanisms he criticizes President Bush for utilizing have been used in past times of crisis by other presidents to accomplish just ends. Specifically, Belanger takes issue with the president’s statements that “freedom and fear are at war” and “freedom itself is under attack.” “Freedom,” Belanger contends, is a “Godterm” that is outside the realm of disputation because it appeals, in the abstract, to a mass audience (25). While I agree with Belanger that President Bush used broad terms with relative meaning in order to promote social cohesion through unifying principles, I think it is altogether fitting and proper that we examine the president’s rhetoric in historical perspective and not give way to alarmist tendencies. A brief survey of twentieth-century presidential oratory reveals that the rhetoric used by President Bush is not without precedent, nor is “death to free and open dialogue” imminent (Belanger 28).

In the spring of 1917, the enemy of the United States was not Islamic extremists but an autocratic

German government that had taken American lives as it waged “warfare against mankind.” President Woodrow Wilson used rhetoric akin to that of President Bush in juxtaposing American liberty and German autocracy. He declared, “Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power.” Describing the Prussian government as the “natural foe of liberty,” President Wilson characterized the United States as “the champions of the rights of mankind.” Thirty years later, in the midst of the Cold War, President Harry S. Truman used similar rhetoric in advocating policies to obstruct the advancement of the Soviet sphere of influence. By identifying the Soviet Union as a government that had gained power by imposing the will of the minority on the majority and sustained it by relying upon “terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms,” President Truman juxtaposed Communism with the American Republic, “distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guaranties of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion and freedom from political oppression.”

Interwoven throughout Belanger’s critique of President Bush’s war rhetoric are superficial comparisons between the rhetoric used by President Bush and by Osama Bin Laden. Belanger takes issue with President Bush’s comment that “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (qtd. in Belanger 26). He asserts that this divine invocation “corresponds precisely with the rhetorical strategy of Osama Bin Laden.” Taken prima facie, this statement may indeed mirror some of Bin Laden’s entreaties to Allah. A more thorough understanding of President Bush’s invocations of the divine could be gained, however, by exploring appeals to a higher power in the wartime rhetoric of previous presidents. In 1863, as the American Republic was embroiled in the second great crisis of its existence, President Abraham Lincoln concluded his address at Gettysburg with a plea for heavenly consecration: “That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Similarly, on the day following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the American people and called for divine intervention: “The American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory [. . .] we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.” Throughout the history of the Republic, American presidents in times of crisis have invoked divine protection in speeches to the American public out of both personal conviction and political expediency. President Bush’s call for divine blessing is neither a cause for alarm nor an unprecedented attempt to solidify the resolve of the American people.

I fully endorse Belanger’s sentiments that critical thought and discourse are imperative for the perpetuation of the Republic. Furthermore, Belanger effectively warns of the dangers of a demagogue using the bully pulpit of the White House to manipulate the conventional values and passions of the American people. As “Publius” warns in the *Federalist*, “of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career, by playing obsequious court to the people [. . .] commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 11). I do not, however, believe that President Bush has either the skills or the guile to endanger the continuation of our Republic.

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