Presidential Polarization: the Rise and Fall of George W. Bush’s Rhetorical Construct

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Abstract

In conflicts throughout history, leaders have portrayed themselves as defenders of the innocent and the enemy as manipulative, depraved, and malicious. The current administration’s take on the War on Terror has proved no exception—al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and the “Axis” of Iraq, Iran and North Korea have been portrayed as not only anti-American, but evil. The administrative demonization of the enemy has been adopted and further transmuted by various domestic news media outlets in their coverage of the attacks of September Eleventh and the ensuing conflicts. United States newspapers, magazines, and other outlets have also adopted a modern adherence to the “God and Country” mantra of earlier reporting in privileging stories regarding the moral stance of the President and his religious rebirth. In this way American media reinforces the “us versus them” image perpetuated by official sources and frames the War on Terror for the American public.

I begin by analyzing how President Bush and his advisors adapted the “good vs. evil” dichotomy to the conflict in Iraq through rhetoric presented in his public addresses. Then I discuss the role of the press in facilitating the adoption of this dichotomy.

In the wake of September Eleventh, 2001, President Bush did what presidents and leaders throughout history have done; he made enemies. Al Qaeda, and namely Osama bin Laden, became public enemy number one—soon to be followed by Saddam Hussein, the “Axis of Evil,” other terror organizations, the French, the Democrats, and all those anti-Bush. Though the effect was never explicit, the umbrella of foes gradually widened to encompass all whom Bush, his administration, and/or their supporters deemed hostile to or simply not accepting of America’s new-found international policy.

At the same time, Bush was also making friends, strengthening the support of his base and beyond with carefully crafted religious references and rhetoric. The administration and media also effectively disseminated an almost holy image of Bush by emphasizing his religious revival and strength in the face of evil in his swift response to the terror attacks. The combination of demonizing and glorifying rhetorical strategies established a polarized world-view—one in which players could be easily categorized as being either with us or against us, good or evil.

These carefully-crafted messages were no doubt intended for easy delivery from Bush’s mouth to the American public by means of domestic media, and for a while the Bush team was highly successful. Major news sources including Newsweek magazine, The New York Times, FOX News and others framed Bush and the arguments over conflict terms of a bipolar world, in many cases borrowing liberally from the official rhetoric. In recent weeks, however, Bush’s popularity has plunged. The rhetorical structure, it seems, has not kept pace with recent events—Hurricane Katrina, the Libby indictment, Harriet Miers’ embarrassing withdrawal of her nomination to the Supreme Court—and the Bush team has yet to replace or renew it.

This paper will discuss both how the administration created a successful polarized rhetorical situation in the post-9/11 world and why the strategy is now failing to elicit the same support with reference to the readiness of American media to perpetuate the dichotomy. The methodology of this analysis will begin with a careful reading of the transcripts of public speeches of President Bush. As scripted statements for staged
events, and unlike secondary media coverage which introduces new frames and biases to political information, the speeches represent accurate reflections of what the administration intended to say at any given time. Following this discussion will be a close analysis of national, mainstream media sources, as they are the primary disseminators of official news and information, the sources from which most Americans get their news, and the most important outlets for politicians interested in keeping up their national image.

**The Evolution of Eloquence: Changes in Rhetoric**

In “A Distinctly American Internationalism,” a speech presented in front of the Ronald Regan Presidential Library, Bush resurrected the “us versus them” mentality of the Regan era, warning “The Empire has passed, but evil remains” (1999). However, as the speech was made before the now-famous World Trade Center attacks, Bush had only an unspecified enemy against which he hoped to rally his constituency. He warned against America’s “determined enemies, who hate our values and resent our successes—terrorists and crime syndicates and drug cartels and unbalanced dictators” (1999).

As the events of terror unfolded, the Bush team had distinct personalities to target—Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda members—and demonized others by association. In an Inaugural Address, Bush spoke of America as a country which seeks to “help the afflicted, and defend the peace, and confound the designs of evil men” (2001). In addressing America’s enemies as “evil” instead of simply Anti-American, Bush rhetorically elevated our nation to one of morality and righteousness over which he dutifully presides.

The president has also elevated his stature using more overt rhetorical strategies. In the same Inaugural Address quoted above, Bush suggested we are now living in a “time of great consequence” (Bush 2001) which added fuel to criticism that Bush “takes himself too seriously” (Davis 2003). Such criticism and concern likely began with Bush’s statement, “I believe God wants me to be president” (The Economist 2004), which caused some to fear that the president feels he has a divine mandate—especially troubling when used in part to justify a controversial war effort.

**Faith, Politics or Both? A Question of Sincerity**

One might assume the president’s religious references are a natural outgrowth of sincere faith on the part of him and his speechwriters, and to some degree this may be true. In a spontaneous interview, when asked to name his favorite political philosopher, Bush candidly replied, “Christ, because he changed my heart” (Dowd 1999). There is clear evidence, however, that much of the rhetoric was used purposefully as a political tool. In “Religion, Rhetoric and the Presidency,” former Bush speechwriter and policy advisor Michael Gerson details several categories in which religious rhetoric was thought to be strategically effective: “comfort in grief and mourning,” discussing the “historic influence of faith on our country,” “faith-based welfare reform,” “literary allusions to hymns and scripture,” and references to providence (2004). A graduate of the evangelical Wheaton College who focused on theological studies, Gerson certainly has acquired effective vocabulary to speak to Bush’s Christian supporters (Davis 2003).

However sincere, Bush and his writers have framed his faith as necessarily exclusionary. When asked to further explain his choice of philosophers, Bush stated “Well, if they don’t know, it’s going to be hard to explain...When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that’s what happened to me.” Maureen Dowd offers her translation: “You’re either in the Christ club or out of it, on the J.C. team or off” (1999), making it a
perect asset for a worldview which contains two mutually exclusive groups.

The Rhetorical Situation: Cracking the Code and Assigning Teams

Whether Bush and his team are speaking from the heart, trying to boost their numbers, or both, their diction has had effectually divided the world into two opposing groups:

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WE ARE:
Religious
American
Freedom-loving
Republican
Moraliy Correct

THEY ARE:
Terrorists
Evil/Wong
Anti-Freedom
Anti-Bush
Anti-American
Anti-Patriotic
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The genius of the dual structure is the permeability of each of the groups. Depending on the situation, the Bush administration can include whichever components of either group they choose. Additionally, each group is infinitely expansive. When Mr. Bush declared that nations not supporting the American-lead War on Terror were acting against us, for example, he expanded the “them” category to all who were not in the “us” group.¹ There is, in his construct, a necessary dichotomy; there can be no neutral parties. This mutual exclusivity was used to encourage actors to join the United States in our international struggle for fear of being taken for our enemies.

Getting ‘On Side’: The Media Joins In

In addition to crafting moving, persuasive rhetoric, the Bush team also excels as packaging information for the media and the public. David Gutterman writes of a scenario in which a press agency asked both presidential hopefuls George W. Bush and Al Gore to give information about their personalities. While Al Gore declined to comment, Bush wisely took advantage of the PR opportunity. His campaign team submitted a statement detailing the beginning of Bush’s religious revival—his meeting with Billy Graham. The narrative was a great vehicle for Bush to get his story out, providing source material for a number of press stories and spreading over countless pro-Bush and pro-Republican websites (Gutterman 2001).

After September Eleven, in the early stages of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, mainstream American news media perpetuated the “us/Them” construct, adding their own analysis and images to the official rhetoric. President Bush was described as a religious, heroic figure who, as the leader of a free and just nation, felt a moral obligation to right the wrongs of the world. The Newsweek magazine cover story entitled “The Road to Resolve,” gave a brief biography of the president in which the author highlighted Bush’s strength, the religious breakthrough in which “he pulled his life together and made some kind of peace, or at least truce, with his demons,” and his “crusade” against terrorists. The article describes role the President’s personal values and beliefs play in his political action with a tone of admiration, saying “he betrayed no inner doubts” about his convictions in a Newsweek interview (Thomas 2004).

Beyond seeing Bush as an almost divinely-inspired leader, many media outlets also adopted rhetoric of “evil,” both literally borrowing the words of Bush and in many cases adopting their spirit. Some, like The New York Times, are careful to attribute the rhetoric to its source. In their headlines, such

¹ “For every regime that sponsors terror, there is a price to be paid, and it will be paid. The allies of terror are equally guilty of murder and equally accountable.” Bush, G. W. (2001, Nov. 10) [Speech to the United Nations]. <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/10/ret.bush.un.transcript/>
as “A Nation Challenged; ‘No Isolation from Evil’ Bush Declares,” Bush’s words are so identified by both quotation marks and the added clarification of “Bush Declares” or something to that effect. Others were not so tactful.

Some outlets began to accept broad generalizations of “evil” which include many potential enemies. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel linked Saddam and al-Qaeda as being part of the same “one big evil family” despite its awareness that there is no evidence of direct corroboration between the two (Thomas 2004).

Most fervent of major media sources has been television’s Fox Network. One New York Times author is highly critical of the network’s acceptance and even encouragement of reporters’ opinionated, emotional expressions on camera. The Times notes that “Osama bin Laden, according to Fox News Channel anchors, analysts and correspondents, is ‘a dirtbag,’ ‘a monster’ overseeing a ‘web of hate.’ His followers in Al Qaeda are ‘terror goons.’ Taliban fighters are ‘diabolical’ and ‘henchmen.’” FOX reporters are said to espouse “unabashed and vehement support of a war effort, carried in tough-guy declarations often expressing thirst for revenge,” provoking discussion on the part of the Times on the press’ role in times of war (Rutenburg 2001).

The article goes on to discuss the tremendous appeal of FOX’s approach to news coverage. FOX News’ viewership increased tremendously once they gave the go-ahead for correspondents to verbalize their pro-war bent, and at times rivals CNN’s audience. To combat their competitor, “CNN...took the extraordinary step of ordering its correspondents to mention the Sept. 11 attacks during any showing of civilian casualties in Afghanistan,” thus reinforcing the evil of terrorism and the justification for war. FOX’s success proved it profitable, and even necessary, for news media to emphasize the demonic qualities of the enemy (Rutenburg 2001).

As time went on and it became acceptable to talk about the 9/11 attacks and U.S. response in a critical light, and when discontent arose regarding the war in Iraq, media outlets began to critique Bush in terms of his own rhetorical structure. Joe Klein, for example, wrote for Time magazine of Bush’s “overheated sense of good vs. evil” and “grand crusade--yes, a crusade--to establish democracy in Iraq” (2004). The scathing article makes a mockery of Bush’s religious rhetoric, and launches an attack that would not be possible (or, at least, not as effective) had the president not gone through so much effort to make faith a part of his public persona.

### Mounting Criticism and Declining Support: Challenges to the Rhetorical Structure

Although the good versus evil viewpoint may be extremely advantageous to a president during war time, the construct is not without its flaws. The president and his administration have come under a number of attacks for their rhetoric, perhaps beginning with a critique levied by the 9/11 Commission and re-told by media sources including the Washington Post. The Commission called into question the need for a “War on Terror” to respond to the single attacks of September 11th, arguing that “the notion of fighting an enemy called “terrorism” is too diffuse and vague to be effective” according to The Washington Post’s synopsis. The Post adds that the Commission’s report identifies two enemies to the United States: the specific threat of al Qaeda, and “a [more general] radical ideological movement in the Islamic world that ‘is gathering and will menace Americans’.” The Commission, it seems, was calling for the government to shift from what it calls a “generic evil” and, in the words of Post author Kessler, “toward a more precise definition of the threat” (Kessler 2004).
In recent weeks, Bush and his administration have endured much criticism of another kind—largely on domestic issues. President Bush’s approval ratings have suffered significantly. The New York Times explains “the slide in the president's approval and trustworthiness ratings in recent polls” by referring to a snowballing amalgam of problems. The paper cites recent interviews of those who voted from President Bush but are now discontent. The defectors blamed their discontent on a combination of Katrina, the Miers nomination, the rising death toll in Iraq, and comparisons of Iraq to Vietnam among others (Zernike, 2005).

It is clear, then, that the long-successful rhetorical situation diagramed above is no longer sufficient to explain the worldview of America, or even of the administration. Within his rhetorical construct, the “them” group is comprised of external enemies, with no overlap with “us.” The administration, however, now faces two groups which do not fit neatly into the schema. First, there are the recent natural disasters, most notably Hurricane Katrina, which are not tangible, demonizable actors. Second, Bush must face internal enemies—Mr. Libby and Mrs. Miers were liabilities intrinsically connected with the administration—supposedly the good guys. The once-separated groups are now overlapping, and the entire worldview that was once so clear is now clouded with uncertainty and lack of faith in the administration.

There has been a corresponding failure on the part of the administration to appear favorably in the press. Normally adept at getting their message across, the Bush team is currently struggling. Most dramatic has been the media’s shift from the traditional episodic portrayal of political events to thematic coverage which emphasized each of the issues as only part of a series of unfortunate events for the Bush administration. In explaining Bush’s falling support, or in covering any one of the issues facing the White House, many major media sources jump at the chance to remind their audience of the many other problems and criticisms of the Bush administration. The Washington Post quotes Mark Murry of NBC News: “‘It has been weeks since Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast; since gas prices began spiking to record highs; and since Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, held her antiwar vigil outside President Bush’s Texas ranch. But, according to the latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, the fortunes of the Bush administration and the Republican Party have not yet begun to recover’” (Froomkin, 2005).

After cataloging the failures of the administration, the Post proceeds to extend them to the entire Republican Party.

Conclusion

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The us/them construct is incredibly effective in explaining the world in times of war and conflict, but is less adept at explaining the current political problems of the administration. The administration, then, has two options; adapt their rhetorical strategy to fit recent events or create a new one. As of this writing the Bush speeches have failed to do either. With Saddam Hussein in the news because of his trial, and with a new tape from Osama bin Laden, the press seems to be turning its attentions back to the War on Terror. However, Americans seem to have lost much of their fervor with which they hated these figureheads and in turn supported the president. Only time will tell whether Bush and his team will be able to take advantage of the recent shift and remind the public of the old Bush image—one of steadfast faith and unflappable determination in the face of a growing evil.
References


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