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HUMAN 1C SEM C15: Humanities Core Writing
 5 June 2015

The Rhetoric of an Era: An Analysis of the Post-September 11th Speeches

of George W. Bush and their Adverse Effects

By the end of the day on September 11th, 2001, the world knew that a new chapter had

begun in the American narrative. The terrorist attacks against the United States that morning by

the militant Islamist group al-Qaeda via airliner hijackings on the World Trade Center in New

York City and the Pentagon building in Arlington County, Virginia absolutely shocked the nation.

These attacks, plus one intended for Washington, D.C., ended three-thousand American lives,

cost ten billion dollars in infrastructure damage, and ushered in an era marked by conflict in the

Middle East and anti-terrorism policy. The live images of the first attack on American soil since

the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 stunned the nation; no one could have fathomed an assault

the scale of September 11th on the global leader and it therefore captured the world's attention

and sympathies. It was a truly scary time and the United States finally understood its

vulnerability on its own playing field.

President George W. Bush was immediately called upon to be the nation's source of

"meaning, reassurance, and purpose" during the national crisis (Zarefsky 137). Bush gave his

first major speech following the attacks nine days later on September 20th, directed at multiple

audiences including both houses of Congress, the American people, other nations of the world,

and the perpetrators themselves. The address attempted to temper the fears of the still shaken

public by answering questions they had about who committed the atrocities and delivering an

ultimatum to those responsible, the "enemies of freedom." The September 20th address is

remembered as the declaration of the War on Terror, a new entry into the American lexicon and Bush's foreign policy legacy. In the address, Bush came out full force against terrorist organizations and any government believed to harbor or support them, including the Taliban regime of Afghanistan that sheltered al-Qaeda. Four and a half months later, Bush delivered the 2002 State of the Union Address on January 29th. Empowered by a ninety percent approval rating and the backing of a nation thirsting for retaliation, Bush needed to prove that the "the state of our Union has never been stronger" despite immense challenges in the period since 9/11. The strategy to win the War on Terror and protect the homeland was generally well received, but underneath the patriotic glow of Bush's speeches laid a far more complex and even alarming picture about post-9/11 presidential rhetoric.

Unlike normal circumstances when rhetoric is often dismissed as the language of demagogues, during a national crisis rhetoric becomes the force that the masses seek in order to "find meaning in the face of unexpected or threatening events, and we in turn call for our leaders to articulate a vision to which we can subscribe" (Zarefsky 137). Bush's particular vision in the wake of September 11th was bringing justice to al-Qaeda, Manichaean dualism about good and evil, and the seizure of weapons of mass destruction being developed by countries hostile to the United States. However morally righteous the president's speeches sounded following 9/11, Bush's rhetoric capitalized on the fears and anger of the American people in order to declare a "war for freedom," deliberately construct the enemy as the ultimate foil to the defender of freedom, the United States, and finally, expand the conflict to epic proportions that went beyond avenging the events of 9/11 to the point of preventative warfare.

This essay will consider how the rhetoric of Bush's September 20th address and the 2002 State of the Union address detrimentally manipulated the meaning of the September 11th attacks to set an aggressive tone for the War on Terror. Next, the essay will analyze how framing the war as a war against "enemies of freedom" shifted the rhetoric to a Manichean dualism between the United States and the perpetrators, representatives of good and evil, respectively. From there, the

cause became universal when Bush called for the entire world to join in the War on Terror. Finally, the essay will explore how the 2002 State of the Union Address signified the major transition to rhetoric about America's responsibility to stop coming threats to the "civilized world" which have since justified the U.S.'s involvement in wars with seemingly no end in sight.

Bush was in Florida promoting his educational program on the morning of the attacks and upon hearing the news he reportedly uttered, "We are at war." Renowned professor of rhetorical history and criticism David Zarefsky argues that Bush's "most significant rhetorical decision was […] to describe the situation as war" (139). Zarefsky offers three reasons that the rhetorical choice was made to frame attacks on 9/11 not as crimes against humanity but as an act of war. First, war rhetoric calls for national unity above all else (140). Bush almost always uses the pronoun "we" to represent a unified America and encourage solidarity. "We will come together" in every possible way, Bush repeatedly says in the speech, from flying the American flag to mourning the loss of the victims to improving air safety. The tasks at hand are enormous, but Bush is confident the country can achieve those objectives by joining together as one. Second, war rhetoric allows the president to re-prioritize his agenda and build it around combating terrorism (140). More than half of the State of the Union address is dedicated to foreign policy and Bush argues that prosperity on the home front is contingent upon victory in the war on terror. Third, the war metaphor provides a goal to focus on, thereby convincing the American public that anything and everything must be done in order to thwart a future attack (141). When Bush says, "[W]hile the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high. Whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay," he justifies a massive increase in defense spending that would have made people feel safe and restore their confidence in military power.

Zarefsky's first three reasons certainly reveal a kind of logic for framing 9/11 as the start of a war – the country was attacked and therefore it must join together with full

cooperation to defend itself. However, a more rhetorically appealing motif that Bush emphasizes

is the War on Terror as a war between the forces of freedom and enemies of that freedom.

Moving beyond mourning its losses, Bush argues that the country was "called to defend

freedom" and that meant destroying the terrorism before it runs rampant. Bush's ties the terrorist

attacks to acts of war in a simple definition: "On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed

an act of war against our country." The characterization "enemies of freedom" made it clear that

the terrorist attacks were ideologically motivated by a dogma that despises America, which Bush

called on the night of the attacks, "the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the

world." The use of "act of war" meant this was "not an act of terror or a crime against humanity"

and therefore, military strategy was favored over criminal justice (Murphy 614). Certainly, the

American public responded to a war declaration with much more fervor than they would respond

to a criminal prosecution, the latter of which is never considered by Bush in his address. To call

the attacks an isolated event or the doings of psychologically deranged criminals is not

comforting to the public because it erases the greater significant of the suffering (Maggio 824).

He immediately follows up the definition by explaining that the war about to be waged is unlike

any the United States has encountered before; the day when "freedom itself is under attack"

marks the beginning of an unprecedented war in which nothing is off limits to attain victory.

Bush equates America to freedom and the terrorists to enemies of freedom to make for an

unambiguous account of the belligerents in the War on Terror.

However, Zarefsky notes that the war metaphor

applied to counterterrorism can become problematic if it is unclear what constitutes victory: "By

its nature, terrorism is an activity of stealth. Terrorist groups lack a clear center that, if

eliminated, would mean victory" (141). Bush lists a series of seemingly clear-cut objectives for

crushing terrorist organizations but he still acknowledges that successes (failure wasn't an option) of the war can't be measured by traditional standards (Zarefsky 143). Nevertheless, labeling the war as unconventional right away is beneficial for the president because the American public gives him full permission to do whatever he needs to end an impending threat. Professor Douglas Kellner is particularly critical of the freedom of power the American public seemed to give Bush to conduct preemptive strikes as a defense strategy and the freedom of the "unilateralist Bush administration foreign policy" to deviate from "major global treaties from Kyoto to every conceivable international effort to regulate arms and military activity" (627). However, immediately following the attacks, the American public hoped the president could give them security and strength if they collectively gave him the power to do whatever to he needed to first protect and then avenge the country.

Bush structures the September 20th address as a series of questions that all Americans are asking, starting with "Who attacked our country?" This rhetorical device identifies Bush with the nation because he voices Americans' concerns and subsequently addresses those concerns with authoritative responses that make him appear well informed, strategically mobilized, and most importantly, the leader of a great nation. Bush reports that "Al-Qaeda is to terror is to what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world – and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." According to professor of American public address and political rhetoric John M. Murphy, the parallelism and analogy in Bush's words "polarize our world and amplify al-Qaeda's evil" when the terrorists are first compared to a "familiar marker" in the mafia and then said to be much worse than that (615). Later in the address, Bush likens global terrorism to a new totalitarianism with historical allusions to the "murderous ideologies" of fascism and Nazism. It is a relatively straightforward assertion that

Americans can universally grapple with: Nazis and terrorists are both driven by a particular ideology, they both have a particular vision for the world made in their abhorrent image, and both are simply pure evil.

This leads to the second question that Bush asks: "Why do they hate us?" He replies, "They hate what they see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government […] They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." Again, Bush sharply divides the world into the side of the Americans and the side of the terrorists by contrasting the hallmark American value of freedom with examples of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan restricting freedoms. Oppressions like women being prohibited from attending school and men being jailed for not having a long enough beard are unfathomable to Americans and further the image of the Taliban as nurturers of terrorism and human rights abuses. While the painting of the enemies as destroyers of freedoms rallies the nation around the anti-terrorism cause, that broad-stroked picture is a gross simplification of the complex realities of al-Qaeda's aims. Osama bin Laden did not claim responsibility for the attacks until 2004, but he issued a *fatwa*, an Islamic legal pronouncement (Kabbani 1) in 1998 that listed the grievances outlining his organization's hostility directed towards America. The complaints included the U.S.'s presence in the Middle East, support for Israel, and a general "disgust with the moral degeneracy of the West" which has "powered" the "radical internationalist ideology" (Jackson & Towle 131). The motives for 9/11 are not to be speculated here, but Bush's characterization of Osama bin Laden as a man solely driven by an irrational evil and on a mission to destroy freedom "denied Americans information crucial for developing a full understanding of the attacks" (Colin 14). In the aftermath of such a devastating event, the American people are not interested in the learning about the concepts of terrorism or

scholarly interpretations of jihad; the only thing they crave is vengeance against the perpetrators regardless of who they are or their motivations. Bush crafted the terrorists in the only image the nation would accept and the only one that would launch a war effort with as much verve and enthusiasm as it did. However, this also becomes problematic when the situation is not understood for all of its complexities. In times of shock, fear, and enormous anger, the risk is that impulsive political and military courses of action become favored over prudent ones that could have been made with more careful consideration and critical thinking of the circumstances.

In addition to alienating the terrorists from Americans as much as possible, Bush alienates terrorists from the citizens of the "civilized world." Early in the address, Bush adds that citizens of eighty countries died alongside American citizens and the leaders of ally nations have been quick to offer their support; this is another deliberate move to argue that the "attacks of 9/11 threatened all civilized countries" and an international coalition to oppose the forces of terror was necessary to ensure the peace of the world (Dietrich 43). Bush relays that this effort is already underway when he states, "The civilized world is rallying to America's side. They understand that if this terror goes unpunished, their own citizens may be next. Terror, unanswered, can not only bring down buildings, it can threaten the stability of legitimate governments." Bush does a couple things here: first, he reiterates that the attacks were aimed at the strongest state of the civilized world and second, he compares the fall of the Twin Towers to the calamitous fall of "legitimate governments" if the terrorists are not checked. The analogy of the towers to governments is effective because it immediately conjures up images of the World Trade Center in ruins and figuratively places them next to the same level of destruction inflicted on entire sovereign nations.

In the *George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader* that includes his commentary on the speeches of the former president, Professor John W. Dietrich recognizes the similarities between the "Bush Doctrine" and the Truman Doctrine of the 1950s. The former is designed to eradicate the spread of terrorist organizations by making no distinction between the terrorists and the

regimes that are suspected of fostering them (Zarefsky 144) and the latter is concerned with preventing a domino effect of communist takeovers. In another example of Bush's proclivity for Manichaean discourse, Murphy writes: "[…] Bush argued that no country could be neutral in this conflict: all had to choose between radicalism and freedom, between support for terrorism and support for civilization, between evil and good" (42). This choice is most effectively captured by one of the most memorable statements made in the address: "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Here Bush warns every nation of the world that if it does not adhere to the anti-terrorism agenda set forth by the U.S. it will be assumed that they are siding with the terrorists. The fact that any country could make itself an enemy of the U.S. by failing to crackdown on terrorism was a new prospect in the American warfare (Zarefsky 145) and the position that any nation that supported terrorism would also be held accountable for terrorist acts was "a position that could nurture legitimate military interventions for years to come" (Kellner 627). Taking that position legitimized Bush's earlier projections that the War on Terror would be "a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen" for the American public whose patience was full in the immediate aftermath of the attack so long as they were guaranteed victory for America in the end.

The 2002 State of the Union Address marks a transition from rhetoric about mourning, justice, and solidarity to rhetoric about America's providence in the fight against enemies that threaten the peace of the world. Bush first reports the strides that the U.S. has apparently made since 9/11, including having "[…] captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression." Almost immediately, Bush portrays the United States as a phoenix that has risen from the ashes of the burning World Trade Center and emerged as the liberator of Afghanistan. Bush aims to convey that America's ability to simultaneously pick up the pieces from attacks on its own soil and "free" the people of another country is a remarkable feat exemplary of America's strength and resolve. He goes on to praise the military as well:

"[T]hanks to [the troops], we are winning the War on Terror." In retrospect, this assertion seems ludicrous knowing that the War on Terror has been the longest war in American history, which is arguably more of a concept than a literal manifestation. In fact, then-doctorate candidate Katie Rose Guest, whose essay on the ideology of terror in American society was named the best graduate student paper at the 2005 American Culture Association Conference, calls the War on Terror a "nebulous concept." Guest argues that Bush declared war on *terror* or "intense fear," an emotion that will always exist rather than *terrorism*, a noun that is rooted in the material world and therefore more tangible as an enemy (368).

Despite concerns about the War on Terror as a misnomer, one thing for certain is Bush's use of religious overtones to definitively categorize the cause of war as just and even a matter already decided by the will of God. The end of the September 20th address touches upon this notion when Bush says, "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." In the State of the Union address, Bush continues to appeal to Christian values while encouraging Americans to be participants in the triumph of good over evil: "America needs citizens to extend the compassion of our country to every part of the world […] Through the gathering momentum of millions of acts of service and decency and kindness, I know we can overcome evil with greater good." Bush associates Americans with service, decency, and kindness while evil is the sole descriptor of the terrorists. Bush inspires the public to uphold those American values, but the president's words can also be interpreted as a statement of American exceptionalism. Bush's morally righteous language in the State of the Union address is not unique to his rhetoric; a trademark of American politics, American exceptionalism centers on the idea of the U.S. as "a providential nation - not only a special nation, but a better nation, a

shining city on a hill" (Lipset cited in Esch 366). Bush continues to cast America as the force for freedom in the world since "the day of our founding," called upon to oppose enemies that "embrace tyranny and death as a creed and a cause." Bush originally named the enemies of freedom to be terrorist organizations and the governments that propped them up, but he warns in the State of the Union that there are even more deplorable enemies that must be opposed as well.

Bush expands the meaning of the War on Terror from its original definition as a war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban to a full-scale campaign against any and all countries believed to be developing weapons of mass destruction, or WMD. All of the rhetoric and its effects examined up to this point have culminated in one of the most infamous coinages in Bush post-9/11 rhetoric: the "axis of evil" (even the "Axis of Evil speech" is a moniker for the 2002 State of the Union address). Bush labels North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as the world's most dangerous regimes, actively pursuing WMD and oppressing their own peoples. Like the comparison between Islamic fundamentalism and Nazism, the term "axis" has historical implications related to the Axis Powers of World War II. The president links the "axis" to terrorists through the possibility of conspiracy between the parties: "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, aiming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred […] the price of indifference would be catastrophic." Bush seemingly equates the three governments to the terrorist organizations in their shared plans for destruction, but actual evidence doesn't support the "existence of a cooperative axis." In his commentary, Dietrich explains that North Korea had no known ideological ties to either Iran or Iraq, and that neighboring Iraq and Iran were "longtime enemies" that engaged in a "brutal war in the 1980s" (47). The use of the word "axis" was

therefore a purely rhetorical choice to raise the question of a coalition of evil assembling to oppose the coalition of anti-terrorism that Bush called for in the September 20th address. The possibility that terrorists could gain access to WMD was a terrifying prospect and a major justification for the preemptive strikes that the Bush administration authorized during the War on Terror. However, *preemptive* is not the same as *preventative*, the latter of which Dietrich argues Bush forwards in his address: "What Bush was really suggesting, though, was not wars of 'preemption' – responding to a clear, imminent threat, but rather war of 'prevention' – responding to the possibility of danger in the future" (48). One can now see how the War on Terror rhetoric escalates from getting justice for the attacks and defending the nation to waging a global war against anyone deemed dangerous to the United States. However, the controversial prospect of preventive war is disguised by a morally righteous and far less contestable course, what Bush calls "civilization's fight […] the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."

The American people will not soon forget the events of September 11th, 2001. The acts of terrorism committed against the United States were undeniably heartbreaking but what followed in the wake of the attacks, which was intended to be a period of healing and renewal, were arguably just as devastating. Part of the United States' response to 9/11 was incredibly admirable, namely the shared grief and solidarity in the light of national tragedy. President George W. Bush was catapulted from his uninspiring persona at the start of his term to a national hero following the attacks - the one who would lead the manhunt for the victimizers and coalition against the forces of evil. However, Bush also initiated a response that included the declaration of a war that had vague and unlimited aims, the characterizations of the perpetrators that exacerbated the already binary understanding of the events, and the escalation of the war that has defined the last fourteen years of American history. Bush's September 20th address and 2002 State of the Union address are examples of presidential rhetoric gone wrong -highly acclaimed at the time it is presented but deemed questionable upon closer examination. In an excerpt of her exposé *The*

Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein asserts, "the Bush team […] quickly moved to exploit the shock that gripped the nation" in the light of the tragedies of 9/11 and be the "strong, solid government" that the "frightened public wanted." In retrospect, that exploitation is evident in the speeches, but at the time they were given, the exploitative language went unrecognized because of the circumstances that Klein writes about. Once the national consensus was in support of this "just" war, the Bush Administration was free to pursue any military agenda it wanted to. Such deception and distortion of the very *real* and dangerous venture of war is what is truly terrifying in a War on Terror.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

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