

# George W. Bush Discovers Rhetoric

*September 20, 2001, and the  
U.S. Response to Terrorism*

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Where in American culture does rhetoric dwell? That seemingly simple question does not permit an easy answer, because the *ethos* of rhetoric as social practice is both ambiguous and ambivalent. Americans have valorized oratory as the literature of the masses and disdained it as the tool of the demagogue. If a speaker seems too obviously to adapt to an audience, we denounce the behavior as glibness and pandering, just telling listeners what they want to hear. It is a mark against a political candidate that he or she will “say anything in order to get elected.” At the same time, we expect leaders to articulate our values and to connect their goals with our needs. We mark ceremonial occasions with speeches, and we note their absence at the moments when we expect them.<sup>1</sup> But when they occur, we may note their existence more than their content. Few can recall what any particular commencement speaker said, and patriotic messages can be conveniently characterized as “Fourth of July oratory,” a term that is as likely to evoke scorn as praise.

We have recognized the power of a speech to give voice to our inchoate thoughts and feelings, yet one of the maxims of our culture is that “actions speak louder than words.” This maxim suggests that words and actions are distinct, and this very distinction marginalizes rhetoric. At best it is a prelude to action; more often it is a cover for inaction. In ordinary usage, “rhetoric” has negative connotations. It is often described with adjectives such as “empty” and “mere,” and it is set in opposition to terms such as “reality,” “truth,” “genuineness,” and “sincerity.” These observations suggest that in ordinary times we recognize rhetoric but view it somehow as a necessary evil. It cannot be banished, but certainly it ought not to be celebrated. Even when we lament the alienation of Americans from politics, the weakening of a common culture, the seeming loss of the skills of deliberation, or the atrophy of the public sphere, we typically do not see these maladies as reflections of the very modest and marginal dwelling place rhetoric is assigned in American culture.

In times of crisis and periods of uncertainty, however, we insist on rhetoric. We hear a call 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. We long for eloquence and acknowledge its power. In these moments, rhetoric has the ability to reshape our world by altering our sense of who we are, by replacing the narrative structure in which we understand events, by changing our hierarchies of value and importance, and by causing us to see old realities in a new light. In these moments we dwell in a rhetorical culture and are glad to do so. We find new meaning and purpose, and we reward the leaders who so skillfully matched rhetoric to occasion.

When the crisis is national in scope, Americans look to the president to perform this rhetorical role. This is not new. Writing about Abraham Lincoln's Civil War leadership, James M. McPherson posits that "communication and inspiration are two of the most important functions of a president in times of crisis."<sup>2</sup> But the rhetorical role of the president has received increased attention in recent years. In his study of qualities that explain presidential success or failure, Fred Greenstein identified "the president's proficiency as a public communicator" first, and he noted that this skill pertains to "the outer face of leadership."<sup>3</sup> Another political scientist, Erwin C. Hargrove, identifies the first task of the president as being "to 'teach reality' to publics and their fellow politicians through rhetoric." This includes, he says, both "the explanation of contemporary problems and issues" and relating them to "the perennial ideals of the American experience."<sup>4</sup> In a well-known formulation, Jeffrey Tulis has argued that the twentieth century so transformed the presidency as to make it largely a rhetorical institution and to define the president's central role as leading the country, not managing the government.<sup>5</sup> Mary Stuckey has described a significant aspect of the president's role as being our "interpreter-in-chief" who helps the people understand what things mean.<sup>6</sup>

In ordinary times, the president's rhetorical performance is constrained by the marginal role our culture assigns to rhetoric. But in times of crisis, this friction is removed and the nation looks to its President for meaning, reassurance, and purpose. Drawing on his own sense of purpose and perhaps on religious inspiration, the president tries to meet these needs through rhetorical leadership.<sup>7</sup> The response of President George W. Bush to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, offers a powerful contemporary example of the suddenly central dwelling place of rhetoric in moments of national crisis.

### *The Rhetorical Situation*

Even as these horrific incidents recede into history, it is still hard to find any words with which to encompass them. Certainly, neither the widely adopted euphemism "the events of September 11" nor the shorthand numeral "9/11" does them justice. To regard the hijacking of airplanes, the destruction of the World Trade

Center, the devastation of part of the Pentagon, and the wasting of thousands of human lives on the airplanes and on the ground in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania as an invitation to rhetoric may border on the obscene. Yet surely that, among other things, is what it was. The facts of what happened were clear, seared indelibly in the mind's eye of anyone who watched television that fateful Tuesday. But what these facts meant was anything but obvious. That would depend, largely, on how the president chose to contextualize them in the subsequent days and weeks, particularly in an address to a joint session of Congress and to the nation on September 20.

It can be safely stipulated that rhetorical prowess had not been regarded as one of George W. Bush's great strengths. He had been ridiculed during the 2000 campaign for his mispronunciations and errors of syntax. Although some of his speeches had been well received, such as his nomination acceptance speech and his inaugural address, it is fair to say that they did not reach oratorical heights. Nor did his early pronouncements as president. Some critics dismissed his verbal missteps as idiosyncratic; others saw them as reflecting a deeper underlying problem.<sup>8</sup>

By early September 2001, Bush's public stature had not changed much since his inauguration. His legitimacy as president was acknowledged, but he still labored under the cloud of the disputed election of 2000. Just over half the public, according to the polls, approved of his performance as president, and many were concerned that he seemed out of touch with average Americans, concerned more with large corporations than with "people like me." If the election of 2000 were rerun, polls suggested that the result would be the same virtual tie.

On the morning of September 11, Bush was in Florida to promote his education program. Told of the terrorist attacks, he wanted to return immediately to Washington but was dissuaded from doing so by fears for his safety. He spent much of the day aboard Air Force One or at military facilities in Louisiana and Nebraska. He did not issue public statements and did not return to the capital until evening, after all commercial airspace had been closed and he could be adequately protected. Neither his silence during the day nor his brief statement that night inspired great confidence. His September 11 speech was "too slight," in the words of one commentator, for the magnitude of the great events.<sup>10</sup>

The president's other early remarks also failed to inspire confidence. He had referred to the terrorists as "folks"—hardly the right language for such an alien force—and then had called for a "crusade" against them, only to abandon the term after being told that it conjured up images of eleventh-century European Christians sent to recover the Holy Land from the reigning Muslims.<sup>11</sup> The Defense Department named a planned antiterrorist campaign "Infinite Justice," but this too was changed (to "Enduring Freedom") after it was pointed out that Islam assigned infinite justice exclusively to Allah. Meanwhile, like the sheriff in some old western, Bush proclaimed that he wanted the suspected terrorist leader, Osama bin Laden, "dead or alive," until his father and others urged him to tone down his rhetoric.

Some advisers reportedly were worrying that Bush's exhortations were "headlong and immature," making threats that could not be backed up and promises that could not be kept.<sup>12</sup>

Bush began to find the appropriate voice later in the week. He gave a eulogy at the National Cathedral on September 14. The speech memorialized the dead, proclaimed the goal of answering the attacks in order to remove evil from the world, asserted that the country was united, and sought divine guidance and blessing. The speech was beautifully moving yet in a sense inauthentic. There was a loftiness to it, a sense of the grand style, that did not match the president's persona. He might have spoken the words, but they were not his own voice.<sup>13</sup> The next Monday, he spoke at the Washington Islamic Center and distinguished the terrorists from Islam, noting that Islam was a religion of peace but the terrorists represented evil and war.<sup>14</sup> Bush was working toward the way he would capture the meaning of the events for the American people, but he was not there yet. His early mishaps were failures of rhetoric—failure to find the right proportions between words and the events they describe, between words and the man who uttered them, between words and the paralinguistic message, between words and the emotions they represent. Unless these breaches somehow could be repaired, the president would have difficulty in "teaching reality": explaining the dastardly attacks as a challenge to American ideals and mobilizing his audiences to respond.

Bush and his advisers correctly sensed that the rhetorical needs had not yet been met. The country and the world needed reassurance, but people also needed to derive inspiration and purpose from the terrible tragedy. Presidential adviser Karen P. Hughes reported that Bush told her, "This is a defining moment. We have an opportunity to restructure the world toward freedom, and we have to get it right."<sup>15</sup> Sensing that the occasion was also a political opportunity for Bush, a chance to establish himself firmly as the leader of a nation united, his advisers chose the magisterial venue of a joint session of Congress for a presidential speech. The preparation of the speech was a collective effort in which the president himself was heavily involved.<sup>16</sup> Although nominally addressed to the assembled senators and representatives, the prime-time televised address was also intended for the American people, foreign leaders, and the Taliban.<sup>17</sup>

### *The War Metaphor*

The president's most significant rhetorical decision was made well before the speech: to describe the situation as war. This was an instinctive response, not the result of deliberate planning or calculation. Reportedly, "We are at war" was Bush's immediate reaction when told of the second attack on the World Trade Center. He told his Cabinet on September 12 that the attacks were "acts of war."<sup>18</sup> In his remarks at the National Cathedral, he said, "War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder."<sup>19</sup> On September 15, he told senior advisers

assembled at Camp David, “We’re at war.”<sup>20</sup> He made similar claims in the September 20 speech and has not wavered from that characterization since.

The president probably could not imagine any other conception of what was taking place. Yet although it may seem pedantic to do so, one should regard the term “war” as a metaphor, not a literal account.<sup>21</sup> What took place on September 11 had some of the characteristics of war: the United States was attacked and lives were lost. Yet other components of war were missing: the attack was not military, it did not come from another state, no country declared war on us, nor did we on any other nation. The congressional resolution authorizing response to the attacks did not label either the attacks or the response as war.

Moreover, the characterization of what took place could have been otherwise. One could regard the acts as crime—a crime of massive proportions, to be sure, and requiring an unprecedented response, but a response that would be seen as a police action with a goal of justice rather than victory.<sup>22</sup> Another possibility was to see the attacks as calling for a diplomatic response. This view would regard them as a high-tech version of the terrorist raids by the Barbary pirates during the 1790s, which John Adams correctly if inelegantly called a “half war.” And Adams resisted the temptation to declare war against France in response. Still another option was to regard the attacks as *sui generis*, with terror located somewhere between crime and war, calling for punishment but emphasizing security and defense.

The point of suggesting that there might be a gap between what happened on September 11 and what counts as war, is not to dispute the president’s definition of the situation but to recognize that it was a rhetorical choice. Understanding it that way directs us to focus on its implications and consequences, and there were many.<sup>23</sup> To begin with, the rhetoric of war assumes and celebrates national unity. No matter how we may disagree on other issues, in the face of war we all stand as one. The immediately visible signs of national unity were the display of flags everywhere and the swift and nearly unanimous passage of both the congressional resolution authorizing force and the Patriot Act. The widespread acceptance of the war metaphor with its emphasis on unity forestalls debate and criticism as luxuries that must await the return of more tranquil times. It makes a place only for the rhetoric of approval and support. In a critique of the use of the war metaphor, Susan Sontag noted its effectiveness in this regard. “Under the slogan *United We Stand*,” she writes, “the call to reflectiveness was associated with dissent, dissent with lack of patriotism.” She adds that to object to the terms of the conflict as one of good versus evil was to be “accused of condoning the attacks, or at least the legitimacy of the grievances behind the attacks.”<sup>24</sup>

Second, the war metaphor justifies reprioritizing concerns. President Bush had told Cabinet members that, while they were still to pursue their previous agendas, the administration’s success or failure ultimately would be determined by its

response to terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Before September 11, the political landscape was dominated by controversies over education and stem-cell research, prescription drug costs and faith-based social services. Whether the Social Security trust fund would need to be raided to balance the operating budget was a hot topic. These concerns all seemingly disappeared in the wake of the terrorist attacks, as did the balanced budget itself, and few people seemed to mind. The new issue was homeland security. In the spring of 2002, the president belatedly accepted the recommendation of a bipartisan panel to reorganize the domestic-security agencies of the government into a new Cabinet-level department. Using the justification that we were at war, he insisted on the need for authority to bypass civil service protections for federal workers in the new department so that he would have maximum flexibility.<sup>26</sup> The House and Senate deadlocked on this specific issue and it became a major theme in the 2002 midterm elections. Meanwhile, the president proposed a budget projecting the need for deficit spending over the next several years, without suffering adverse political consequences. Members of his own party lobbied for even more tax cuts as a means of economic stimulus. The whole landscape of economic policy was reconfigured after the terrorist attacks. The recession that soon developed was attributed to the attacks and their aftermath, and it did not hurt the president's popularity.

Third, the war metaphor communicates resolve and focuses on a goal. It sends a clear message of determination to stay the course and to see the final surrender of the enemy. Limited wars may tax our patience, but so long as we are making progress toward the goal, we will persevere in the effort. The metaphor, Richard Kohn has written, "prepares the population for a long, costly, complex campaign that will subordinate American foreign and domestic policy to the struggle, necessitate changes in government organization, and result in some—perhaps substantial—casualties in the armed forces." Additionally, he notes, it informs allies and other governments of the seriousness of American resolve.<sup>27</sup>

These considerations suggest that the war metaphor is a powerful rhetorical resource, as it has proved to be for President Bush. Nevertheless, it is not without potential difficulties. If the object to which it is applied falls short of the magnitude of military conflict, the metaphor can seem trite or trivial, as happened when war was declared on domestic problems ranging from poverty and drugs to energy shortages and street crime.<sup>28</sup> Obviously that was not a problem in this case; if attacks on American cities did not constitute war, it was hard to know what did. But there were other problems when the war metaphor was applied to terrorism. What, for example, counts as victory? By its nature, terrorism is an activity of stealth. Terrorist groups lack a clear center that, if eliminated, would mean victory. One could say that the war would be won when people felt more secure, but feelings of security and calm always could be disrupted by another unexpected attack. "The very word 'war' suggests military measures and, of course, victory," Stanley

Hoffmann has written, “rather than the difficult, slow, and partly clandestine operations that fighting terrorism entails.”<sup>29</sup> Nor was it clear who the enemy was. Terrorists do not wear identifying uniforms; their mode of operation is to blend in to a society and then to strike from within. And the attribution of “terrorist” is laced with ideology. What one side defines as terrorists, the other may define as oppressed fighters for freedom.

These difficulties may become serious over time and as a result of sober reflection, but the functions of the war metaphor in creating unity, limiting debate, changing priorities, and mobilizing for action are immediate. They offered President Bush significant benefits and he took advantage of them.

### *The September 20 Speech*

President Bush sustained the imagery of war in his speech of September 20. There he defined the conflict as a war between freedom and fear. He organized the speech as a series of answers to questions Americans were said to be asking, and thereby put himself in the favorable position of both representing the concerns of the citizenry and responding to those concerns with authoritative answers.<sup>30</sup> He outlined the general strategy to be followed against the terrorist threat, issued nonnegotiable demands and excluded the possibility of compromise, and predicted inevitable victory in the contest to follow.<sup>31</sup> These are all staples in the rhetoric of war. But the September 20 speech also reveals interesting nuances.

For example, President Bush stressed the unique character of the war. It was as if, after placing the attacks in the genre of war, he wanted to distinguish this from other wars so that the normal conventions of the genre need not constrain him. “On September 11,” he said, “enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country.” This sentence contained three fundamental assumptions stated as incontrovertible facts: that the terrorists were “enemies of freedom,” that the acts constituted acts of war, and that they were directed against our country as a nation-state. These stipulations allowed President Bush to discuss the terrorist attacks as deliberate provocation by those who would start a war with the United States. But he quickly added that this was not like other wars. Except for Pearl Harbor, it was the first attack on American soil since 1865. It was not only a surprise attack, but an attack on civilians in a great city. And the resulting conflict, he pointedly noted, would not be like the Gulf War of 1991—quick and decisive—nor like the 1999 war in Kosovo, requiring no ground troops and leading to no American combat deaths. Far more than military actions would be encompassed by the war. As a result, it would be not “one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes visible on TV and covert operations, secret even in success.” In short, President Bush is saying first that we are at war, so we should subordinate other priorities, come together, and act to repel this threat, and second that we cannot measure our success in

doing so by traditional standards since this war is exceptional. Juxtaposing these two themes, one sees in the president's speech an appeal for open-ended support of the administration's decisions about what to do and how to do it. The uniqueness of the war would become a warrant for the expansion of American (and presidential) power.

A second noteworthy feature of the September 20 speech is the portrayal of the enemy. In many wars, it has been thought desirable to personalize and then demonize the enemy, whether it be Hitler, Ho Chi Minh, or Saddam Hussein. Osama bin Laden only partially fills this role, because Bush's main focus is on loosely organized terrorist groups. He appears more concerned with definition by negation. First, he makes clear that Muslims are not the enemy; this is not a war of civilizations. Speaking "directly to Muslims throughout the world," he assured them, "We respect your faith. . . . Its teachings are good and peaceful. And those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith." Islam was not the enemy; nor were we at war with mainstream Muslims (or, by extension, Arabs).

Likewise, the enemy was not the people of Afghanistan. After illustrating the excesses of the Taliban, President Bush made clear that "the United States respects the people of Afghanistan. After all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid." He would maintain this theme three weeks later. Even as he announced the start of military strikes in Afghanistan, he proclaimed the friendship of Americans for the Afghan people.<sup>32</sup>

The enemy, then, is different from what we normally would expect. It is not a people or a state, or even a ruling government necessarily, but what Bush described in one passage as "a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as Al Qaeda" and in another as "a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them." This latter is a crucial pairing, because if Al Qaeda is elusive, sovereign states are not. So, for example, while the Afghan people are not our enemy, the Taliban regime is, so long as it continues to harbor terrorists. Distinguishing regimes from people allows Bush both to regard the enemy as distant and furtive and to embody it in regimes such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, it makes the identification of any such regime as the enemy dependent on the seemingly empirical question of whether it supports terrorism.

President Bush explains why terrorists hate us, why they would make themselves our enemy, in a simple and straightforward way: "They hate our freedoms." They hate the fact that our government derives its authority from the people. They hate Christians and Jews and wish to expel them from much of Asia and Africa. And "they stand against us because we stand in their way." Although perhaps fitting for the occasion, this simplistic and self-serving account of terrorist motives was the weakest part of the speech. It in no way excuses terrorism to inquire why in much of the world there is antipathy to global capitalism or to some aspects of American culture. But the president's answer seals off the need for

self-examination. Terrorists hate us because we are good and they are evil, he almost seems to say. On this reading the war becomes defined as a Manichean struggle. And if there were any remaining doubt of the evil of the enemy, it is dispelled by the president's linking terrorism with "all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century—fascism, nazism, and totalitarianism" (obviously excluding communism since the support of several communist nations was sought for the antiterrorist coalition). In short, the enemy identified itself by its own actions. It could be furtive or it could be clearly visible, but its motivation was unmistakably evil.

Overcoming an amorphous enemy motivated by evil was an ambitious goal. Yet the formulation of the goal in the September 20 speech reveals an important nuance. Although still quite broad, it was less vast than might be suggested by the unmodified phrase, "war on terrorism." Probably realizing that the eradication of all terrorism everywhere was an impossible goal, Bush referred instead to defeating "every terrorist group of global reach." He never said that this formulation was a refinement or limitation of earlier statements. But it allowed him to bypass involvement in internal or small regional conflicts that did not threaten American interests, while still laying down the marker that the war will end only when every global terrorist group "has been found, stopped, and defeated." This statement certainly would encompass the destruction of the Al Qaeda network without returning to the cold war assumption that a threat anywhere was a threat everywhere.

If in one sense the president narrowed the conflict (by confining it to global terrorist organizations), in another he enlarged its scope. The war would be fought not just by the United States but by the whole civilized world. He had foreshadowed this move in remarks to his Cabinet, when he had said, "This enemy attacked not just our people, but all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world."<sup>33</sup> In the September 20 speech, although the principal focus was on the United States, President Bush mentioned that citizens of eighty other nations died in the terrorist attacks. And after outlining measures to be taken, he stated, "This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom." This appeal served further to isolate the terrorists, defining them not just as enemies of the United States but as enemies of civilization. Such marginal figures did not deserve anyone's consideration or support. Additionally, Bush established the predicate for his attempt to build an antiterrorism coalition. He was not asking other nations to come to America's aid; rather, he was asking that all nations, out of mutual self-interest, form a coalition.

Moreover, he permitted no nation the luxury of evading this invitation. Nations that did not participate could be seen easily as harboring or supporting terrorists, and Bush made clear that any such nation would be regarded as a hostile power. The refusal to distinguish between terrorists and nations that harbored them was referred to sometimes as the "Bush Doctrine." This appeal, of course, was intended for nations who might have mixed motives or divided loyalties. When military

operations against the Taliban were launched in early October, the president reiterated the theme, stating that “every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict there is no neutral ground.”<sup>34</sup>

The attempt to force nations to choose between supporting the United States and supporting terrorists was itself a prominent feature of the speech. In one of the most memorable passages, Bush insisted, “Every nation in every region now has a choice to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” According to this formulation, there truly was no neutral ground. Since global terrorism was, by definition, a worldwide threat, no nation could claim to be uninvolved. On the other hand, the United States did not regard any government as our enemy a priori—certainly a departure from the normal circumstances of war. In the past, when we’ve entered a war we’ve known whom it has been against. But any nation could make itself our enemy by failing to take the needed steps to crack down on terrorism. Forcing this choice on other nations divided the world into friends and foes but left to others the decision about the category in which they belonged.

The features of the September 20 speech that have been identified so far speak to the justification for American military response. But unleashing an unchecked wave of militarism can be dangerous to democratic values. Other features of the September 20 speech, although they may have received less public notice, address this need and provide at least a measure of countervailing rhetoric. For example, the president did not altogether eschew the rhetoric of justice, even as he spoke of war. Toward the beginning of the speech he evoked the swiftness and certainty of frontier justice, saying, “Whether we bring our enemies to justice or justice to our enemies, justice will be done.” This is an alternative to images of militarism, but only superficially so, since it suggests that America will be prosecutor, judge, and executioner all at once. At the end of the speech, however, the president tempered this image when he said, “Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice” and appealed for the gifts of divine wisdom and guidance. Here was a suggestion, however subtle, that the rhetoric of war and the rhetoric of justice were not necessarily at odds.

War rhetoric typically includes calls for sacrifice, but here too the situation was atypical. If the goal of the terrorists was to undermine the American economy or life-style, then any sacrifice from normal routines could be taken as a sign that the terrorists had won. In this context, the patriotic thing to do was to carry on with one’s life, to maintain consumer spending, and to uphold American values. This introduces a tension, for it is hard to mobilize national unity and invoke a war psychology for the purpose of exhorting people to go about business as usual. They may be more likely initially to support the war if it involves no sacrifice, but their support may be very thin.

The September 20 speech implicitly acknowledges this anomaly. Structurally, there is a section that seeks to answer the question Americans are said to be asking:

What is expected of us? It comes immediately after the announcement of steps to strengthen homeland security and after the promise of military and economic reprisal. But the six items President Bush mentioned really demand relatively little of any civilian: “live your lives and hug your children,” be calm and uphold American values, give to charity, be patient with delays and inconveniences, participate in the economy, and pray “for the victims of terror and their families, for those in uniform and for our great country.” For most people, these steps are thoroughly unobjectionable, yet they render it easy to caricature shopping at the mall or waiting in long lines at the airport as acts of great patriotism—and thereby to trivialize what the war on terrorism is all about.

President Bush’s second request in this list is worthy of special mention. It is not uncommon for intolerance to be a byproduct of war. Not only did the president make clear that our quarrel was not with Muslims or with Islam, but he specifically urged Americans to uphold the values of tolerance and respect for difference. Indeed, he regarded yielding on these values as tantamount to granting victory to the terrorists. As he put it in the speech, “We’re in a fight for our principles and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith.” This is a theme that Bush has maintained consistently, as a counterweight to the ethnocentric nationalism that often characterizes wars.

In the short run, the relatively low level of sacrifice required has made it easy for the American people to rally behind their president. It is as if they are giving their endorsement to war by proxy, since it does not seem to cost them anything. They are acquiescing in presidentially directed war and, in going about their business, relegating themselves to a passive role. But Bush indicated that the war on terrorism would take a long time. As the memories of September 11 recede and life returns to something approaching normal, it may be harder to sustain support for the administration’s military and economic moves against terrorism, and the tradeoffs against other goals that they will require, if the sense of war psychology is lost.

A final aspect of the September 20 speech that warrants note is the confident prediction of success. This too is a frequent feature of war rhetoric: however uncertain things might look at the moment, we are buoyed by the knowledge that our cause, being right, will prevail in the end. This note of optimism pervades the president’s speech and probably has a good deal to do with its effectiveness in rallying the American people. At the very beginning, Bush paid tribute to the strength of the country’s initial response: the courage of ordinary citizens, symbols of patriotism and solidarity, “the saying of prayers in English, Hebrew, and Arabic,” the unusual display of congressional bipartisanship, and the messages of support and concern received from all over the world. These illustrations support the inference that the terrorists *already* have failed because they miscalculated. They

aimed to weaken America but have strengthened it instead. By this standard, of course, the war is a success before it really begins.

This note of confidence is sustained throughout the speech. The terrorists will end “in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies.” The president and Congress “will come together” on a host of legislative fronts to protect the nation. Reassuring those who might believe that we are facing a new age of terror and fear, the president acknowledged dangers but insisted that “this country will define our times, not be defined by them.” He pledged that “our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage.” These notes of confidence were obviously intended to reassure a stunned and grieving nation. Then, in fairly obvious allusion to Winston Churchill, came the staccato phrases: “We will not tire. We will not falter and we will not fail.” These were paralleled by Bush’s personal pledges: “I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflicted it. I will not yield. I will not rest. I will not relent.”

The trump card in confident predictions of success is the claim that God is on our side, a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of war, and President Bush played this card as well. “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war,” he said. “And we know that God is not neutral between them.” As a result, although the course this conflict will take is not yet known, “its outcome is certain.” One might question how anyone could claim to know the will of God, but the significance of these statements is in their rhetorical function. Years ago, Murray Edelman suggested that “the most important task for leaders in crisis is clearly to convey that they are in control of things and know what to do.”<sup>35</sup> Certainly the confident predictions of success help to sustain such an impression.

To summarize, then, President Bush’s speech of September 20, 2001, embodies several decisions about how to respond rhetorically to terrorism: to regard it as war, but war of a different and possibly unique kind; to marginalize the enemy and define terrorism as opposed to world civilization; to force all nations to choose sides; to minimize the sacrifice required of ordinary citizens; and to forecast inevitable victory. Each of these decisions helped to establish a rhetorical response to terrorist attacks that resonated with the American people and their values.

By most accounts, Bush succeeded at his task in this speech. By a wide margin, people agreed with the judgment of *New York Times* columnist R. W. Apple Jr.: “Mr. Bush rose to the occasion, finding at times the eloquence that has eluded him in the past.”<sup>36</sup> Of the respondents to a CNN/Gallup/*USA Today* poll, 87 percent rated the speech either excellent or good, and 78 percent felt that it clearly explained U.S. military goals.<sup>37</sup> Columnists echoed Apple’s judgment. David Broder, for example, heard in Bush’s speech the echoes of Abraham Lincoln, and Richard Cohen described the speech as Churchillian, noting that the “theater” of the occasion made Bush finally seem “presidential.”<sup>38</sup>

*Unintended Consequences*

Like other actions, of course, rhetorical moves can have unintended consequences. The choice of the war metaphor was a terministic screen, and it is but a slight gloss on Kenneth Burke to say that we control our terms and then they control us.<sup>39</sup> The trajectory created by Bush's appeal, with its open-ended description of the enemy and its stark contrast between good and evil, likewise could lead to unsatisfactory results. Fitting as it was to the occasion, the speech and the rhetorical decisions it reflected could prove to be vulnerabilities in the long run. There is at least some evidence to suggest that this is the case.

The danger most often cited in the weeks after the speech was that the mindset of war would lead to a chilling effect on civil liberties. Racial profiling was acceptable in some quarters if the targets appeared to be from the Middle East. There have been cases of indefinite detention and reports of harsh treatment. And there have been repeated warnings, such as Paul Starr's comment that "the risk of using the term [war] is that it provides a rationale for restricting civil liberties and treating disagreement as disloyalty. . . . [T]he language of war in the struggle against terrorism is only the latest attempt to turn a national emergency into a political trump card."<sup>40</sup>

Although some of the provisions of the Patriot Act, some of the contingency plans for military tribunals, and some of the statements of Attorney General Ashcroft raise alarms, the danger of undermining individual freedoms—at least for U.S. citizens—does not at this writing appear to be clear and present. Nor have the new regulations been tested in court, and in general courts have been skeptical of government claims against civil liberties. Still, this is an issue on which eternal vigilance is vital. But the prospect for such vigilance is weakened if, as mentioned above, the public relegates itself to passivity. If the public opinion polls, congressional resolutions, and midterm election results are taken to constitute blanket endorsements of the administration, then the war on terrorism is protected from public scrutiny or political debate. The furtive nature of terrorism and the need for secrecy in response become the justifications for the administration's holding its cards very close to the vest. In return, the public is told that the sacrifices that normally characterize wartime will not be required, and indeed that it is a patriotic duty to go about one's normal routine. This is a combination that easily enables public disengagement and, if that happens, then the threat to civil liberties is greater.

A second possible unintended consequence is disregard for multilateral initiatives and a determination to "go it alone." The September 20 speech, while it encourages other nations to join in a coalition against terror, proclaims U.S. policies that are not contingent on anyone else's approval. To be sure, this was a concern about the Bush administration even before September 11. The United States refused to sign the Kyoto agreement on global warming and had indicated its

intention to develop a missile defense system even if that required abrogating the antiballistic missile treaty with the Soviet Union. If anything, however, multilateral involvement has been enhanced since September 11. United Nations resolutions endorsed reprisal against the Taliban. And when the United States threatened unilateral action against Iraq in 2002, the response of the international community led the United States, despite statements by Vice President Cheney that the UN was ineffectual, to backpedal and seek a resolution from the Security Council demanding that Iraq disarm its weapons of mass destruction at the risk of war.

If these two possible consequences have not yet developed into actual problems, two others have. First, the very simplicity and comprehensiveness of President Bush's appeals allows for them to be universalized, stretched beyond their original context and invoked by others whose agendas the United States might not share. And in the face of such "copycat rhetoric," the United States may be immobilized by its own arguments from disagreeing, even if we otherwise wish to do so. The good-versus-evil formulation and the fact that "terrorism" is left undefined, help to make this possible. It is worth noting that some of the earliest endorsers of the United Nations resolution denouncing terrorism were nations with histories of repressing minorities—minorities who conveniently now could be classified as terrorists in order to justify their government's repression.<sup>41</sup> As *Chicago Tribune* correspondent Howard Witt put it, "Suddenly, nearly every country facing a domestic insurrection, a civil war or just an inconvenient opposition declared that it, too, was fighting terrorism and sought a place for itself on the right side of Washington's new world view."<sup>42</sup> Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski also warned of the risk that "foreign powers will seize upon the word 'terrorism' to promote their own agendas, as President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of India and President Jiang Zemin of China are doing."<sup>43</sup> In each case, these nations confronted enemies who might plausibly be labeled terrorists, and yet, as Stanley Hoffmann has written, "their circumstances were radically different from those under which Osama bin Laden deployed his rabid theological and anti-Western global network."<sup>44</sup> But the United States' ability to call attention to the differences or to disassociate itself from the leaders is quite limited.

The case of Israel and the Palestinians is particularly instructive. While the most militant of the Palestinians contend that they are struggling to overturn an illegal occupation or to recapture the land that was wrested from them in the 1948 war for independence, the Israeli government quite plausibly maintains that the violence that began in September 2000 is terror pure and simple. Prime Minister Sharon has made arguments very similar to those in President Bush's September 20 speech. What Bush had said about Osama bin Laden, Sharon said about Yasir Arafat. He was at the center of an infrastructure of terrorism. He must be isolated in order to dismantle this infrastructure, which is the goal of Israeli policy and a precondition for peace. President Bush has little choice but to endorse, or at least

condone, Israel's action, as columnist David Sanger noted, if he is going "to retain a consistent and coherent stance against terrorism."<sup>45</sup> Bush repeatedly has emphasized Israel's right to defend itself against terror. In April 2002, he did call upon Israel to withdraw from Palestinian-controlled areas in the interest of peace, but that call was rebuffed with impunity. In June, he reverted to an endorsement of Sharon's position that progress toward peace and a Palestinian state would require that Yasir Arafat be replaced by a new Palestinian leadership truly committed to the campaign against terror. Now, Sharon's policy may be right, and endorsing it so strongly may be precisely the stance that Bush would choose to take under any circumstances, but that is doubtful. It dooms to irrelevance any efforts to establish a meaningful cease-fire, it is unlikely to stop Palestinian suicide bombers from attacking targets in Israel, and it encourages Arab doubts about whether the United States is an honest broker<sup>46</sup> or that it merits their support in a campaign to topple Saddam Hussein.

The conflict between India and Pakistan over the long-disputed territory of Kashmir proved particularly challenging for the Bush administration. India charged that Pakistani-trained terrorists were infiltrating the disputed region and threatened war unless this provocation ceased. The logic of antiterrorism would lead the Bush administration to side with India, but the United States was especially indebted to President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan for supporting the effort to overthrow the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. The United States succeeded in defusing the crisis in June 2002, but the basic conflict remains—and with it the danger that either side might use the rationale of fighting terrorism to launch a preemptive nuclear strike.

The Bush administration is also placed in a difficult position when Russian president Vladimir Putin, also an ally in the campaign against the Taliban, insists that the war against international terrorism will not be complete unless it includes victory over the rebels in Chechnya. Drawing a distinction between the tactics of the Chechen rebels and Al Qaeda terrorists proved particularly difficult when the rebels commandeered a Moscow theater and held several hundred civilians hostage in October 2002.

The larger danger is that the Bush rhetorical stance, adopted in copycat fashion by other nations, could effectively deny the United States the option of prudent determination of what is in its own interest. Bush's Manichean struggle against terrorists of global reach neither contains gradations of threat nor makes room for extenuating circumstances. While wanting to avoid the cold war mindset by not having to become involved in local conflicts, the president risks bringing about the same result indirectly. If a threat to freedom anywhere is a threat to freedom everywhere, then we have no option to pick and choose the commitments that really matter. We must be willing, as President Kennedy said, to "pay any price, bear any burden." If we feel compelled to support or condone any nation that replicates our own argument against terrorism, we place ourselves largely at the mercy of other nations we ostensibly are seeking to aid.

Beyond the danger of inviting copycat rhetoric and being immobilized by it, the other serious unintended consequence of Bush's rhetorical moves is that they create a slippery slope for the United States itself. The seemingly reasonable position that terrorists should be stopped before they have an opportunity to strike could be used to justify a wide range of American actions for which warrants would otherwise be lacking. This is evident in the Bush administration's effort in the fall of 2002 to seek authorization for the use of force against Iraq.

Saddam Hussein had violated numerous United Nations resolutions adopted at the end of the Persian Gulf War to assure that Iraq would forswear efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction. United Nations inspectors were supposed to verify compliance, but they had not been permitted in Iraq since they had been withdrawn in late 1998 in advance of an American bombing raid. That the United Nations had grounds to enforce its resolutions was clear. Yet there was no evidence that things had changed so dramatically in 2002 or that there was a direct threat to the United States justifying a unilateral American response. Seemingly, deterrence had worked successfully for a dozen years; why was preemptive American action justified now?

For President Bush, the terrorist attacks of September 11 furnished the necessary warrant. Although he claimed that "some Al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq" and that "Iraq has trained Al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases," there was no credible evidence linking Iraq to the September 11 attacks.<sup>47</sup> Yet the president, appealing for a congressional resolution authorizing the use of force, made a connection: "Some citizens wonder, after 11 years of living with this problem, why do we need to confront it now. And there's a reason. We have experienced the horrors of September 11." It was not that Iraq was involved in those attacks; it was that Iraq had the motivation and soon would have the capability to precipitate even deadlier threats. And Bush reminded his listeners that on September 11, "America felt its vulnerability even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth. We resolved then and we are resolved today to confront every threat from any source that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America."<sup>48</sup> Responding to concerns that an attack on Iraq would interfere with the war on terrorism (by alienating allies), he said that dealing with the Iraqi threat was necessary in order to win the war against terror.

The difficulty with this line of reasoning is that it could be extended beyond limit. Iran and North Korea, the other nations the president had declared to constitute an "axis of evil," could be equally threatening. Indeed, in October 2002, North Korea acknowledged that it was already engaged in a program to develop nuclear weapons. And beyond those nations, in theory any trouble spot could be depicted as a potential source of terrorist attacks. In the name of combating terrorism, preemptive attack could become an accepted element of U.S. policy and strategy. Interestingly, in justifying his policy against Iraq, Bush referred to President Kennedy's statement at the time of the Cuban missile crisis forty years earlier, that we no longer live in a world in which a nation faces maximum peril only from the

actual firing of weapons. Yet in considering how to respond to the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, the Kennedy administration considered and rejected the option of preemptive attack. Not only could it not guarantee the elimination of all the missiles, but Attorney General Robert Kennedy forcefully argued that it would erase the moral distinction between the contemporary United States and the Japanese who launched the attack on Pearl Harbor.

It would be folly to suggest that President Bush's speech of September 20 could set these events—subservience to copycat rhetoric abroad and a slippery slope at home—in motion in any direct causal way. Yet as Leland Griffin has pointedly argued, rhetoric has trajectories.<sup>49</sup> The speech, in responding to the immediate situation, also articulated a rhetorical vision congenial to such unintended consequences as these. The implication is that leaders in moments of crisis need as best they can to look down the road, exercising rhetorical leadership that not only will meet the needs of the moment but that will wear well over time.

### *Reconsidering the Ethos of Rhetoric*

What, finally, does the initial American response to terrorism suggest about the *ethos*—the dwelling place—of rhetoric as a social practice? It bears out the claim that, however much rhetoric may be disparaged during tranquil times, in moments of crisis the American people seek it out and demand it of their President. Rhetorical leadership reassures, unites, and mobilizes. On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush rose to the occasion. He and his writers found the right words, the right themes, the right voice. More than any military or diplomatic result—for these have been somewhat equivocal—it is probably the president's rhetorical success that has sustained the unusually high regard in which the country continues to hold him. So it seems that part of the answer is that rhetoric is a national resource held in reserve, to be drawn upon when crisis conditions require it.

But there is a dark side to this account. What sort of rhetoric, after all, is it that worked so well on September 20? Many theorists of rhetoric emphasize its contingent nature. Since Aristotle, we have regarded the uncertain as the subject matter of rhetorical deliberation. A strong rhetorical culture, on this view, is one that recognizes that all discourses are partial, that they are put forward as ways to formulate and test claims in the belief that speakers and listeners together are engaged in the search for *phronesis*, for practical wisdom—and that it will emerge as the outcome of deliberation rather than existing prior to it. Rhetoric is thus an invitation to participate in a process of reality construction.<sup>50</sup>

This view of rhetoric has very little in common with the dwelling place that is implicit in President Bush's speech of September 20—or, for that matter, with other Presidential responses to moments of crisis. As a thought experiment, one might consider what the public reaction would have been had Bush said on September 20, "We forgive our enemies," or "We have suffered a great tragedy but

life must go on,” or “We must decide together what to do about this threat; I call therefore for unfettered public discussion,” or “We must show the world, by the power of our example, that fighting is not the way to resolve our differences,” or “We must recognize that this is a calamity sent to us by God as punishment for our sins.” Each of these responses would call forth a rhetoric different from that of September 20 and would suggest a very different dwelling place. It would be a place in which rhetoric humbles, is self-reflexive, and imbues one with the perspective of others. Each of these stances might have been adopted by other speakers or in other times or places. But given the contemporary American culture, it is simply not conceivable that George W. Bush or any other President could adopt a rhetoric along any of these lines. The options were not even imagined, and to have pursued them would have been suicidal. Crises do not invite deliberation; their urgency forestalls it. The rhetoric of war constructs an enemy unworthy of international deliberation and assumes a unity of purpose that does not require deliberation at home. Rather than setting forth claims and arguments, it constitutes a kind of argument by definition, setting forth partial discourses as if they were the complete picture and uncontested.<sup>51</sup> This is the rhetoric not of the open hand but of the closed fist. In wartime it may be what we need, and it serves a positive social purpose, as it did for a troubled nation on September 20, 2001. But if it is the only acceptable dwelling place we can find for the social practice of rhetoric, then advocates of rhetorical culture should have real cause for concern.

### Notes

1. For example, on the anniversary of the World Trade Center terrorist attack, the memorial program included no original speeches but recitations from the Declaration of Independence and speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. There was some criticism of the program planners for seemingly implying that no contemporary speaker could rise to the occasion.

2. James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 112.

3. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 5.

4. Erwin C. Hargrove, *The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1998), vii–viii.

5. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987).

6. Mary E. Stuckey, *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1991).

7. I discuss this idea more fully in David Zarefsky, “The Presidency Has Always Been a Place for Rhetorical Leadership,” in *The Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership*, ed. Leroy G. Dorsey (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 20–41.

8. For an example of the latter, see Mark Crispin Miller, *The Bush Dyslexicon: Observations on a National Disorder* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

9. A summary of polls concerning George W. Bush during 2001 is available at the web site of the *National Journal* (November 13, 2002). I am indebted for this citation to Trevor Parry-Giles.

10. See D. T. Max, "The Making of the Speech," *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001, 34. A similar view was advanced by Mary McGrory, "Leaders in the Breach," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2001, A2.

11. William Safire, "On Language: Words at War," *New York Times Magazine*, September 30, 2001, 26.

12. See Frank Bruni, "Bush, and His Presidency, Are Transformed," *New York Times*, September 22, 2001, B2.

13. Max, "Making," 34.

14. "Islam is Peace' Says President," September 17, 2001, available at the web site of the *National Journal* (November 13, 2002).

15. Bruni, "Bush, and His Presidency," B2.

16. Max, "Making," 36.

17. *Ibid.*, 34. These were the audiences identified by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

18. Katharine Q. Seelye and Elizabeth Bumiller, "Bush Labels Aerial Terrorist Attacks 'Acts of War,'" *New York Times*, September 13, 2001, A16.

19. "President's Remarks," *New York Times*, September 15, 2001, A6.

20. Elains Sciolino, "Bush Tells the Military to 'Get Ready'"; "Broader Spy Powers Gaining Support," *New York Times*, September 16, 2001, A1.

21. A similar point is made by Michael Walzer, "First, Define the Battlefield," *New York Times*, September 21, 2001, A27.

22. R. W. Apple Jr., "A Clear Message: 'I Will Not Relent,'" *New York Times*, September 21, 2001, A1, reports that many Europeans preferred the characterization of an international police action.

23. The functions of the war metaphor in this case are summarized by Richard H. Kohn, "A War Like No Other," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 29 (November 2001): 4.

24. Susan Sontag, "Real Battles and Empty Metaphors," *New York Times*, September 10, 2002, A31.

25. Bruni, "Bush, and His Presidency," A1.

26. Alison Mitchell, "The Perilous Search for Security at Home," *New York Times*, July 28, 2002, sec. 4, p. 4.

27. Kohn, "War Like No Other," 4.

28. I discuss domestic applications of the war metaphor in David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1986), *passim*.

29. Stanley Hoffmann, "America Alone in the World," *American Prospect* 13 (September 23, 2002): 20.

30. Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles, "Presidential Therapies and the Events of September 11: Mimesis, Methexis, and Nationalism in the Rhetorics of George W. Bush and *The West Wing*" (paper presented at the Eighth Biennial Public Address Conference, University of Georgia, October 5, 2002), 16.

31. "President Bush's Address on Terrorism Before a Joint Meeting of Congress," *New York Times*, September 21, 2001, B4. Subsequent quotations from the speech are taken from this text.

32. "Bush's Remarks on U.S. Military Strikes in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 8, 2001, B6.

33. Seelye and Bumiller, "Bush Labels," A16.

34. "Bush's Remarks on U.S. Military Strikes," B6.

35. See Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1964), and *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham, 1971), for an elaboration of this view.

36. R. W. Apple Jr., "A Clear Message: I Will Not Relent," *New York Times*, September 22, 2001, A1.

37. These poll data may be found at the web site of the *National Journal* (November 13, 2002).

38. David S. Broder, "Echoes of Lincoln," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2001, B7; Richard Cohen, "Taking Command," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2001, A29. I am indebted for these citations to Trevor Parry-Giles.

39. On terministic screens, see Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1966), 44–55.

40. Paul Starr, "9–11, One Year Later," *American Prospect* 13 (September 23, 2002): 2.

41. This argument is advanced, for example, by Serge Schmemmann, "After Months of War, Long Fights Still to Wage," *New York Times*, May 26, 2002, sec. 4, p. 4.

42. Howard Witt, "Terror War Has U.S. in Dubious Alliances," *Chicago Tribune*, September 4, 2002, sec. 1, p. 1.

43. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Confronting Anti-American Grievances," *New York Times*, September 1, 2002, sec. 4, p. 9.

44. Hoffmann, "America Alone," 20.

45. David E. Sanger, "Hard Choices for Bush," *New York Times*, April 1, 2002, A1.

46. See, for example, Neil MacFarquhar, "Egypt Assails the Lumping of U.S. War with Israel's," *New York Times*, May 1, 2002, A11.

47. "Transcript: Confronting Iraq Threat 'Is Crucial to Winning War on Terror,'" *New York Times*, October 8, 2002, A12. This is a transcript of a speech President Bush delivered in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002.

48. "Transcript: Confronting Iraq Threat," A12.

49. On the concept of rhetorical trajectories, see Leland M. Griffin, "When Dreams Collide: Rhetorical Trajectories in the Assassination of President Kennedy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (May 1984): 111–31.

50. For a fuller exposition of this view of rhetorical culture, see Thomas B. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1993).

51. I discuss this sort of discourse more fully in David Zarefsky, "Definitions," in *Argument in a Time of Change: Proceedings of the 10th NCA/AFA Summer Conference on Argumentation*, ed. James F. Klumpp (Annandale, Va.: National Communication Assn., 1998), 1–11.