

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Arguing For A Cause: President Bush And The Comic Frame



1. Introduction

On the morning of September 11, 2002, a drama unfolded. It began in the air and ended in flames. Over the course of the day, planes would crash into buildings, individuals would be emotionally and physically injured, thousands would die, and a national symbol would collapse. This ensuing drama would become the single worst case of terrorism to occur on American soil and one of the worst cases of violence in history.

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush responded to the terrorist attacks that transpired on September 11. In a speech delivered to a joint session of Congress, Bush argued a position and spelled out a plan that would begin a new social movement that not only involved the United States, but also an international assembly.

The following analysis will first explore the rhetorical situation through the lens of Burke in an attempt to discover why and how this text was dramatized. Additionally, Bush's motivational apparatus will be analyzed through a Dramatistic perspective by utilizing the constructs of the comic frame and examining the associational/ dissociational clusters used by Bush. Exploration of this text through the lens of the comic frame reveals that Bush reaffirmed the social hierarchy and ultimately gained support for a "War on Terror" through civil disobedience and public liability. Recognition of the associational/ dissociational clusters explores how Bush used symbols to create identification among a national and international audience. Furthermore, they illustrate how Bush named a vague enemy and christened this enemy a clown in order to maintain, rather than eliminate, this enemy's role in society.

2. A President Challenged

In the days between the attacks and Bush's address to Congress, millions watched and listened as Bush's rhetorical techniques began to alter and change. Previously shying from venues that called for an impromptu response, Bush not

only began offering personal opinions, but also seemed comfortable in doing so. His rhetoric shifted from guarded to colorful and full of Wild West colloquialisms as he pronounced that he wanted Osama bin Laden “dead or alive” and that he would “smoke them out” (Bumiller & Bruni, 2001).

Rather than curb Bush’s word choice, speech writers and White House Officials decided to utilize this “down home” image to reconstruct the fractured American mythos of invincibility. It is this same rhetorical structure that was applied to the discourse presented to the world on September 20. In addition to being conscious of word choice, Bush was also mindful of his choice of venue (Max, 2001). Choosing to speak in front of a joint session of Congress would provide an air of authority and stability.

3. A Response

Understanding of this text is important for four main reasons. First, nine months have passed and the impact of the terrorist attacks is still not completely known. Thousands of people witnessed these events first hand and millions of people watched the drama unfold over the mass media. With a death toll that surpassed the number of people killed at Pearl Harbor, millions of people have been forced to question the American myth of invincibility.

Second, the audience of this text was vast. Along with the majority of the United States, millions of people worldwide witnessed the delivery of this text. Heads of State either attended, witnessed, or specifically addressed this text immediately after its delivery. More importantly, since President Bush argued the need for unwavering global support and the possibility of an international military response, it was imperative that this text be persuasive on a multinational scale.

Third, the rhetor was under pressure to deliver an effective and multi-layered response. After all, “in a time of crisis, words are key to the presidency” (Max, 2001, 33). Bush needed to console the friends and family members of those lost in the attacks. He needed to comfort fearful Americans while also warning them that future attacks were not unlikely. He needed to rally an international audience and publicly name supporters. He also needed to label an enemy. In addition to these exigencies, Bush also needed to prove his effectiveness not only as a rhetorician but also as an effective leader in a time of crisis.

Not only should this text be examined, it should be investigated from a methodological standpoint that evaluates the effectiveness of the arguer while simultaneously exploring the shape of the social movement. A dramatic perspective recognizes these aspects as it views the social movement as a drama.

Consequently, the impact of social movements and the effectiveness of a current leader would also be studied in a unique manner because of the timeliness of the text's topic.

4. A Dramatistic Perspective

When Kenneth Burke introduced his concept of *Dramatism*, he theorized that all life is a drama and that the need for drama is so innate that it can be comparative to food and shelter (Burke, 1969). Burke explains that drama is so fundamental that withholding its magic and mysticism is ultimately a denial of resources that a person needs in order to cope with intense moments. Furthermore, it is the examination of rhetoric that truly exploits the dramatic elements of a situation. It is this exploitation, this unearthing, that reveals the true motivation behind a text.

Burke explains that moments of intense drama often motivate people to "unhinge." As a result, a person's motivation for behavior can be found through examination of text. More specifically, the description of associational/dissociational clusters questions how Bush used symbols to communicate his message. This aspect of *Dramatism* addresses the patterned relationships in a text. It is the arrangement of these terms that allows a text's plot to unfold and defines the players. Examination of these clusters defines who is good, who is not, and what the future holds for each (Burke, 1969). In order to understand the choice and impact of these terms, this methodology also allows for examination of the rhetor's frame of reference. Utilizing the comic frame as a perspective provides insight into Bush's treatment of the social system. Additionally, discovery of Bush's motives in using these terms reveals how he used identification in an attempt to gain adherence from an international audience.

While there are still many unanswered questions surrounding the events of September 11, a critical analysis of the major argumentative response to these events is not only warranted, but imperative if scholars are to continue to understand the far reaching impacts of public discourse.

5. The Direction of Movement

Over the last several years, scholars have studied the impact of public discourse on the effectiveness of social movements. Critical analysis has not only shed light on the techniques used to motivate groups of people, but to also evaluate the effectiveness of a leader. Furthermore, many scholars have found application of the comic frame useful when attempting to understand the nature of a movement.

Carlton explains that “frames are the symbolic structures by which human beings impose order upon their personal and social experiences” (Carlton, 1986, 447). In other words, a frame of reference will help to unearth a rhetor’s understanding of an event and how she or he has decided upon a specific course of action. Furthermore, frames are decisive. They take sides. For Burke, understanding of rhetor’s frame of reference provides understanding “we derive our vocabularies for the charting of human motive” (Burke, 1937, 92).

The comic frame specifically addresses the formation of social movements by illuminating the contradiction between the public and the private. Burke explains that “a social organization is also public property, and can be privately appropriated” (Burke, 1937, 168). As a result, what is good for the whole is not always good for the parts.

Griffin (2000) takes this a step further to explore the influence of autobiographical elements of the rhetor on text. Not only does the rhetor use the text to define him or herself, but uses these traits to gain adherence with the audience. This is exemplified by the structure of the text as Bush utilizes a series of questions: Who attacked our country? Why do they hate us? What is expected of us? These questions not only voice the concern of Americans, but of their leader as well. In the text immediately preceding these questions, Bush clearly defines himself as an American and begins to use “I” and “we” as synonyms for “Americans.” Consequently, Bush begins the process of identification with the American people.

In addition to the process of identification, Bush also uses this series of questions as means of presenting direction. The Burkean concept of directional substance illustrates how these questions begin to make a distinction between what a person wants to do and what a person thinks that she or he should do. Burke explains that while “one may freely answer a call, yet the call could be so imperious that one could not ignore it without disaster” (Burke, 1969, 32). When individuals begin to act based on this concept, Burke explains that “we get movement as motive” (1969, 32).

When discussing the concept of directional substance, it is important to point out that this is strictly dealing with the future, with guiding the actions of a movement. Directional substance is clearly defined as Bush asks, “What is expected of us?” As individuals choose to or not to follow Bush’s call to “uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here,” they are forced to identify with Bush’s movement for fear that they may go against the

values that they may base their lives upon. Furthermore, use of the directional substance in conjunction with associational/ dissociational clusters enables Bush to not only define a movement, but to also present and reaffirm a social hierarchy.

6. Villain or Clown?

As previously mentioned, Bush was in need of defining an enemy. However, it is important to first examine the difference between villain and clown and comedy and humor. Carlson points that, while the two are often associated with one another, “not all humor is comedy” (Carlson, 1988, 310). The Burkean sense of comedy is that which “reduces social tension and adds balance to our world view.” Within the comic frame, Burke communicates a sense of hope, a renewal of the social structure. Moreover, it takes on a “charitable attitude toward people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation” (Burke, 1937, 166). It is this “charitable attitude: in combination with the need to reaffirm the social order that illustrates Bush’s labeling of the enemy as a clown rather than as a victim.”

Within the confines of the comic frame, Burke distinguishes between the villain and the clown. On one level, the villain is evil. At first glance, it may appear that Bush is clearly defining the enemy as evil. Closer investigation reveals that Bush is inferring that those who are labeled as Terrorists in the Americans/Terrorists cluster are merely mistaken. They have been “debunked” into their choices. Bush explains that the “terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism” and that the “terrorists’ directive commands them to kill.” It is phrases such as these that infer that these “terrorists” are not truly evil; a “directive” that forces them to make evil choices has misguided them. What they do may be considered evil, but the people themselves are merely set astray.

It is important for Bush to make this distinction for two key reasons. It allows the renewal of faith in mankind. If Bush can find a way to rid the world of this “directive force,” then perhaps he can put an end to the terrorists’ behaviors. This distinction also promotes the myth that Americans are in the moral right and subsequently inherently possess the ability to show savages the error of their ways. “Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or justice to our enemies,” promises Bush, “justice will be done.”

The comic frame of reference also enables Bush to ambiguously define the enemy. Applying the fundamental blame on this “directive” allows Bush to refer to an all-encompassing enemy in different ways. For example, Bush first referred to the

“enemies of freedom.” He then referenced “a loosely affiliated terrorist organization.” While these explanations are exchanged with more specific terms such as Al-Qaida and bin Laden, the multiplicity of terms lends itself to an ambiguous definition.

7. Conclusion

Motive of the rhetor is revealed through the application of the comic frame in addition to other Dramatistic elements. It is important to understand that that the rhetor’s motives revolve around maintaining social order. Additionally, it is important to understand the rhetor’s definition of social order. For Bush, maintenance of the social order is upheld when individuals follow the social movement that he has defined. In this specific situation, the social order is reaffirmed as Americans and their allies support the “War on Terrorism.” Naming the enemy in ambiguous terms enables Bush to continue to redefine the terms of this war and consequently control its longevity.

Social movements appear to present a choice but in actuality do not and should continue to be examined. In this specific text, Bush repeatedly offers a choice verbally. However, a choice does not truly exist. In his use of the Americans/Terrorists cluster, Bush chooses sides for the individuals who have fallen into each category. Furthermore, he decides what characteristics allow certain individuals membership into the categories. Since membership is predetermined within the text, Bush does not need to argue for Americans or those who agree with the “American morality” to join the movement.

The need for Bush’s statement and the magnitude of suffering because of the events of September 11 are not questioned in this essay. In moments of crisis, it is often rhetoric that answers the call for guidance and assurance. It is the power of rhetoric that enables a leader who had once been labeled as a poor speaker to rise and deliver what some are calling the most powerful speech of modern times. But it is also the power of rhetoric to move and motivate people. It is the power of rhetoric that often reminds us of who we want to claim as ours and whom we want to cast into the fire. Just as words reflect our reality, they can also shape and reshape our understanding of the world. In times of crisis, it becomes imperative to understand how rhetors are using symbols and the impact of these messages.

In answering the need for a response, President George W. Bush defined who was to blame, defined a course of action, and labeled sides so as to rally support for a

cause. Rhetoric that is often scrutinized to reveal these tactics has historically been those with a decidedly unethical basis. Numerous scholars have examined Hitler's rhetoric to reveal the unethical construct. And rightly so. But the question must be asked as to how we as scholars should approach a text in which the ethical basis is vague. How do we approach a text when the wounds are still visible and festering? How do we maintain our objectivity when the strands of our moral fiber are inherently woven within the rhetor's message? It is these questions that should guide us in the years to come.

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