# ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Making The Case For War: Bush's Rhetorical Validation Of America's Action


Wars are waged through words as well as weapons. This is not to say that military or security realities do not exist apart from rhetorical descriptions of them. Rather, the rhetoric that defines a nation's interests, describes aggressive actions, and exhorts a people to support their leaders as they commit to military operations is a crucial component in any country's war effort. No American president could mount a war without public discourse to explain and justify the war. Even in a situation when a country has been attacked on its home soil – as the United States was on September 11, 2001 – rhetoric is necessary to contextualize the attack, give it meaning, and justify the appropriate response to it. This paper will examine the rhetoric of U.S. President George W. Bush following the September 11 airline hijackings that resulted in attacks on the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon, and in a downed plane in Pennsylvania. We will review three theoretical constructs that can illuminate President Bush's discourse: presidential crisis rhetoric, war rhetoric, and the rhetoric of militant decency. We will then use these theories to explain how Bush discursively developed five themes: the nature of the crisis situation, the power of the United States, the character of the United States, the character of the enemies of the United States, and the social responsibility of America. Finally, we will explore implications of Bush's rhetorical choices, the theoretical frameworks that we have used, and some broader international issues.

This paper will analyze six statements the president made in the wake of the hijackings: Bush's three public appearances throughout the day on September 11, his address to the Joint Session of Congress on September 20, his announcement on October 7 that the U.S. had begun military strikes in Afghanistan, and his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002. The six speeches express an evolution of discourse as the narrative of the events evolved from a crisis to war.

In his examination of presidential crisis rhetoric, Windt (1992) argues that situations do not constitute crises until they are labeled as such by a president. While Windt (1992) excludes external military attacks on the United States from the category of rhetorically created crises, he also discusses Franklin Roosevelt's message of December 8, 1941, asking Congress to declare war on Japan as an example of crisis rhetoric. This illustrates that even if a president faces a situation where the facts appear incontrovertible, the president's interpretation of these facts and events defines the nature of the crisis and strongly influences the response of the citizens. In creating or defining these crises, Windt (1992) argues that presidents use three strategies. First, the president establishes that the country faces a new situation that demands a response. Here the president offers a narration of salient facts and a characterization of the motives of the agents involved. Second, the president places this new situation within an ongoing conflict between antagonistic forces. Finally, the president calls for public support of new policies.

George W. Bush, in his post-September 11 rhetoric, was responding to a series of horrific events that were witnessed by a worldwide audience. The images and reports of carnage and mayhem certainly constituted a crisis apart from the political meaning of the events. Despite what viewers had seen seen, the president needed to provide factual data as well as an interpretive framework. Bush's post-September 11 rhetoric provided another crucial function as his administration responded militarily to the attacks. As Windt (1992) notes, crisis rhetoric also seeks "to unify the people behind a particular policy announced by the President" (97).

Campbell and Jamison (1990) specifically analyze presidential war rhetoric and also argue that presidents utilize predictable strategies as they justify their calls to war. Presidents employ five arguments that have endured because they are necessary for the president to demonstrate rhetorically an appropriate understanding of the powers of the office. First, the president tries to convey that the desire to go to war is a thoughtful, rather than rash, decision. Second, the president presents a narrative that justifies war. Third, the president appeals to the audience to show unity in their support for the war effort. Fourth, the president must establish that he or she is justified in taking on the powers of commander in chief. And finally, the president may employ "strategic misrepresentations" to legitimize further the call to war (Campbell & Jamieson,

1990, 105).
A final theoretical framework will be helpful in understanding the post-attack rhetoric of President Bush: the concept of militant decency. Friedenberg (1990) describes the public statements made by President Theodore Roosevelt as he positioned the nation to wage both a physical and ideological war. This rhetoric featured three themes: a portrayal of the United States' power, an extended development of the United States' character, and a description of social responsibility that the United States should and would assume. According to Friedenberg (1990), this rhetoric of militant decency can illuminate the rhetoric of other presidents who try to promote military action.

The first aspect of the rhetoric of militant decency is the emphasis on power. The power can be individual, national, or presidential. The idea of forcible diplomacy is not new. Throughout history people have equated a nation's strength with its ability to defend itself and wield its might against its enemies. Power gives a nation options in handling a situation but these options are also restrained by moral codes of righteousness. Friedenberg (1990) argues that the rhetoric of militant decency is militant because it is not hesitant about the use of power. It is decent because the power is to be used for just ends (Friedenberg, 1990, 31).
Second, there must by an emphasis on character. Here the president focuses attention not only on the head of state but also on the character of the country. A nation should be honest, it should have the courage to act, and the action should stem from a thoughtful understanding of the situation based on common sense. In addition a nation's actions should mirror their position within the international community and befit their status. In this case the rhetoric is militant because it takes a firm stance on how a nation should strive to exemplify noble character and it is decent because it involves belief and action that is consistent with that nobility (Friedenberg, 1990, 31).

A nation also should be socially responsible in applying militant decency. Each nation must realize that they are only one piece of the complex puzzle that makes up the world. The actions of a nation should stem from a utilitarian concept that is grounded in moral conviction. Responses to situations should not be selfish but should be dedicated to the betterment of the whole. While defense of the homeland is paramount to a nation's sense of security, that security is tenuous if there is significant unrest around the world. The religious nature of this theme is unmistakable. Here exists a clear distinction in defining moral decency as a

conflict between good and evil, and between right and wrong. Viewed from the lens of social responsibility the rhetoric is militant because it imposes and upholds the socially responsible role, and it is decent because the action is for the common good.

The following analysis will focus on five dimensions of Bush's rhetoric as he sought to interpret the crisis and justify war as a response. We will specifically examine Bush's effort to depict the new situation created by the attacks, the power of the United States, the character of the United States, the character of the enemy, and America's social responsibility.

The president's first rhetorical task was to describe the situation the United States faced. Bush made his first public statement regarding the attacks during a visit to a Sarasota, Florida, elementary school, where he was informed of the events. The initial reports were sketchy, and Bush's response was correspondingly terse. He observed that "this is a difficult moment for America" and termed the events " a national tragedy." He also informed Americans that he had mobilized the federal government to help the victims of the attack and to find the perpetrators. When Bush touched down in Louisiana later in the day, he was more descriptive of the situation. "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward," he began his remarks. He provided evidence of the steps that he, his cabinet, the military, and the federal government were taking to ensure U.S. security at this time. He reiterated that the United States was working to find the parties responsible for the attacks. He also contextualized the event by interpreting it as a test of America's resolve. The president further developed this framework in his speech from the Oval Office on the evening of September 11. "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat" the president declared, concluding, "they have failed." Bush again listed the steps that he and the government had taken to protect national security. He added, "The functions of our government continue without interruption" and also told the audience that the "search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts." In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, two of the president's highest rhetorical priorities were to label the horror and outrage produced by the attacks and simultaneously reassure the American people that their nation and government had not been brought down by the attacks.

In the weeks and months after September 11, the president had more opportunity to frame the situation. Bush's description of the new situation faced by the United

States depicted Americans as having been hitherto unaware of their vulnerability. “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom,” he said on September 20. In his October 7 speech Bush reminded his audience that “we have learned, so suddenly and so tragically, there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror,” which he described as “today’s new threat.” Several months later, in his State of the Union address, the president again expressed this interpretation of events. He noted that “the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers.” The new situation, according to Bush, ushered in an era of new awareness and responsibility for the U.S.

This portrayal of the United States had several implications. It depicted the United States as an unwitting and innocent party in the conflict. It also justified a swift and powerful military response. This view also suggested the moral qualities of the participants and the moral choice posed by the situation. The United States was a blameless victim, while its attacker was evil. Nations around the world would have “a choice to make,” said Bush on October 7, noting, “In this conflict there is no neutral ground.” Finally, Bush argued on October 7 that the attack on the United States had not only national repercussions, but was significant for the entire “civilized world.”

The public statements by George W. Bush in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks also embody the three themes of militant decency, which are power, character, and social responsibility. In all his speeches he emphasized the use of power. In his first statement on the morning of September 11, even though the details and the scope of the situation were unclear, the President indicated that the United States would “hunt down and find those folks who committed this act.” He further indicated his resolve as he noted that, “Terrorism against our nation will not stand.” Bush repeated this litany in his afternoon statement in Louisiana when he firmly declared, “Make no mistake: the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.” The hunt metaphor clearly in line with use of power indicates a relentless vigil to discover the perpetrator of the crime where the hunter wields the power and the prey runs in fear. Bush then indicated that “all appropriate security precautions to protect the American people” had been taken and that the United States military “at home and around the world is on high alert status.” That evening in Washington Bush again rattled the saber, observing that “Our military is powerful, and it’s prepared.” By September 20 the president warned that the U.S. military would not make a distinction between terrorist groups and sovereign states that protected them.

President Bush's speech before the Joint Session of Congress on September 20 reaffirmed Bush's earlier statements with regard to America's ability to demand righteous resolution. The hunt metaphor had become reality; Bush promised action. The president pledged, "Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done." He also articulated that the power of the US was a contributing factor in the terrorists' decision to attack the U.S., noting that "They stand against us, because we stand in their way."

The final aspects of power in the September 20 speech included declarations of the various alerts Bush had issued since September 11 which indicated the actual use of military force in the near future. He told the military, "Be ready. I've called the Armed Forces to alert and there is a reason. The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud." Concluding the September 20 speech Bush summarized the power and resolve of the U.S. by proclaiming that, "We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail."

In the speech of October 7 power in the form of military force moved from being an option to being a course of action. Bush opened his speech saying that, "On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan." Bush then described how the power initiatives outlined in the September 20 speech had been implemented noting that he had mobilized law enforcement agencies, the National Guard, and the Reserves. The president also told the military that their goal was just. Bush meets Friedenberg's criteria for militant decency. Although Bush was not hesitant about the use of power, that use was tempered with common sense and it was for a just end. Bush reminded Americans of the demands placed on the Taliban in the September 20 speech indicating that, "None of these demands were met. And now the Taliban will pay a price."

The State of the Union address provided an assessment of America's military action. Bush indicated a level of success by proclaiming, "we are winning the War on Terror." Conceding that the war was not over, but alluding to the resolve of U.S. action Bush advanced that, "Our cause is just, and it continues." Pointing to the ongoing nature of the conflict, he warned that any strike against the United States would result in a military confrontation. Bush closed the State of the Union by saying, "Steadfast in our purpose, we now press on. We have known freedom's price. We have shown freedom's power. And in this great conflict, my fellow Americans, we will see freedom's victory." He thus exemplified the use of power in militant decency.

Bush also evoked character as a component of militant decency. He declared on the afternoon of September 11, “The resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake, we will show the world that we will pass this test.” In the evening address the President created several depictions of character. Noting that the attacks were intended to instill fear in the nation, Bush posited that “they have failed.” He continued, “Our country is strong. A great people have been moved to defend a great nation.” Bush returned to his theme of American strength and endurance when he said, “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These attacks shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.” And finally, with an optimistic vision of solidarity and confidence, Bush proclaimed that “This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time.” Similarly, he closed his October 7 speech by vowing, “We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail.”
The president also developed a portrait of compassionate Americans. Bush noted on September 20 that he had “seen the decency of a loving and giving people who have made the grief of strangers their own.” During that speech Bush also said that the conflict was with the Taliban government of Afghanistan, and not the Afghan people nor Muslims. He directly stated to Muslims of the world, “We respect your faith.” According to the president, American compassion included religious tolerance.

The faith of Americans is another character trait Bush utilized in the September 20 speech. He observed that, “Prayer has comforted us in sorrow, and will help strengthen our journey ahead.” At the end of the address Bush also argued that the ideological struggle had God on America’s  side. “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.” He concluded the September 20 speech with a prayerful exhortation. “Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice – assured of the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America.” At the conclusion of the State of the Union address Bush crafted a vivid depiction of the American spirit: “Beyond all differences of race or creed, we are one country, mourning together and facing danger together. Deep in the American character, there is honor, and it is stronger than cynicism. And many have discovered again that even in tragedy – especially in tragedy – God is near.”

According to Friedenberg (1990) virtue as embodied in Christian ideals is a strong component of good character.
Bush thus presented America as a strong country which displayed tolerance of diversity and good will toward other nations. Not only were these defining qualities of the United States, according to Bush, they were the reasons the United States was attacked in the first place. On the evening of the attacks the president said, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." During his State of the Union address, Bush described evidence of the "hatred" expressed by the enemies toward the United States.

Bush spoke of the courage and character of individuals as well as the nation. In the September 20 speech he spoke directly of the courage of Todd Beamer, one of the passengers who rushed the terrorists in the plane that was downed in Pennsylvania. He described the "endurance of rescuers, working past exhaustion." He concluded the September 20 speech displaying the police shield of George Howard, "who died at the World Trade Center trying to save others." The shield had been given to Bush by Howard's mother, Arlene. In his speech of October 7 Bush referred to a letter he received from a fourth grade girl with a father in the military. "'As much as I don't want my Dad to fight,' she wrote, 'I'm willing to give him to you'." In the State of the Union speech Bush again turned to children, the future of America, for an emotional appeal using character by referring to a note and a football left by a little boy for his father who was lost. "Dear Daddy, please take this to heaven. I don't want to play football until I can play with you again some day."
Bush also demonstrated presidential character in the speech of September 20 as he imposed the challenge of the situation on himself. He professed his personal resolve as he affirmed that, "I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it. I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people." In his State of the Union address he vowed, "We won't stop short," and thereby preempted comparison to his father's Operation Desert Storm.
Bush's depiction of the United States as the good party in this global conflict was matched by his portrayal of the enemy as the evil party. As noted earlier, theorists of presidential crisis rhetoric and war rhetoric note the narrative aspect of the president's rhetorical interpretation of an event. As Fisher (1987) notes, characters are critical components of narratives; audiences judge the believability

of narratives in part based on the believability of characters in those narratives. Presidents are careful to illustrate the character of their own country in describing situations of international conflict. Compelling protagonists require antagonists, so the president must also portray an enemy or enemies that can serve to unite and mobilize American citizens. Students of social movements point to the framing of the opposition as an important function of movement rhetoric (Stewart, Smith, and Denton, 1989). These characterizations of the enemy work to "gain legitimacy for the movement while stripping the opposition of its legitimacy" (Stewart, Smith, and Denton, 1989, 125). This purpose of social movement discourse is also an important function of rhetoric justifying war. In the case of the War on Terrorism, this was especially critical because the enemy was not immediately known; therefore, the president had to develop this enemy rhetorically. As this analysis will show, Bush's rhetorical construction required sensitivity and precision.

Throughout his speeches, Bush described the enemy as having many evil qualities. Yet Bush faced several challenges in portraying the enemy. The president's need to depict an enemy was frustrated initially by the lack of the enemy's identity. When the enemy was identified it was a difficult enemy to label – it consisted of a group in hiding whose existence and motives were unfamiliar to most Americans. Moreover, Bush could not rely on easy (and often bigoted) portrayals of the enemy as being a country, a people, or a faith.

Bush began his characterization of the enemy by imbuing the enemy with the qualities of evil and cowardice. In his September 11 statement from Louisiana Bush called the unidentified attacker a "faceless coward." That night he told his audience that Americans had seen "evil, the very worst of human nature." On September 20 he described the terrorists as "enemies of freedom." When announcing the United States' air strikes against the Taliban, he observed that "the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places." The enemy was not only wicked, but would run and hide when challenged.

Bush publicly declared the identity of the enemy in his September 20 speech. He identified both al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden as the parties responsible for the attacks. Because Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were relatively unknown to the American people before the September 11 attacks, Bush gave Americans reference points for understanding how they functioned and what kind of threat they posed. The president warned that this enemy was really a loose

confederation of terrorists. To clarify the workings of al Qaeda he provided this analogy on September 20: “Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime.” This characterization foreshadowed law enforcement techniques such as seizing financial assets that U.S. officials had used against the mafia and would use against al Qaeda. Bush set al Qaeda in historical context in his September 20 speech by noting that they “follow in the path of facism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.” The president also connected al Qaeda with previous acts, including the bombing of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and the attack of the U.S.S. Cole. Bush also cautioned that the terrorists constituted a real threat. “Thousands of dangerous killers,” he noted in his State of the Union address, “are now spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning.”

While the president could identify a group and a leader as the enemy in the War on Terrorism, this enemy was untraditional and difficult rhetorically because it was not as easy to identify as a nation. In fact, Bush carefully delineated the relationship between al Qaeda and sovereign governments and religious practices. In his October 7 speech Bush repeatedly said that American military force was directed against the Taliban and not the people or other governing interests of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he conveyed the message that any nation that protected terrorist groups would by definition act as terrorists as well. “If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents,” said Bush on October 7, “they have become outlaws and murderers, themselves.” A sovereign government that allied itself with the terrorist enemy would also be considered an enemy. Bush made his most sweeping claim in this regard on January 29 when he identified North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”

Bush also had to distinguish between the religious extremism of the terrorists and the legitimate practice of Islam. On September 20 he characterized the terrorists’ religious beliefs as a “fringe form of Islamic extremism.” He pledged respect for the Muslim faith and described the terrorists “as traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself.” This characterization of the enemy also highlighted the virtue of Americans’ religious tolerance.

Finally, the president provided motive for the character of the enemy. In his speech to the Joint Session of Congress he said that these terrorists were driven by their hatred of the U.S. He expanded on this idea in his State of the Union speech when he said, “They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our

freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." As noted earlier, this explanation of the enemy's motivation reinforced the portrayal of the United States as the virtuous party in the conflict.

The president articulated the theme of social responsibility – the third component of militant decency. Bush began his remarks that afternoon in Louisiana with the announcement that freedom had been attacked. It is important to note that it is not American freedom that was assaulted, it was the universal value that many nations embrace. This was one of the first indications that the hunt to punish would go beyond U.S. borders. In the evening address Bush displayed power and signaled the theme of social responsibility when he warned, "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." Beginning to publicly call for support from U.S. allies in this global battle against terrorism, Bush noted that "America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world and we stand together to win the war against terrorism." The defense of freedom was an international effort.

While the September 11 attack was on American soil, the world was drawn into the battle and the United States became a defender of the world. The social responsibility that accompanies a nation's power compels a nation to serve the global community. President Bush utilized the social responsibility topos of militant decency as a justification for intervention and action to combat terrorism. As the U.S. was obligated to fight world terrorism social responsibility dictated that America could rely on global assistance. Bush laid out the terms clearly on September 20: "This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom." If global help proved insufficient or not forthcoming, the president made clear that the U.S. would act to fill the void. In his State of the Union speech he conceded, "some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will."

The president framed America's social responsibility in two final ways. First, the United States was compelled by history to join the fight against terrorism. He explained in his State of the Union address, "History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight." Second, America was a noble defender of freedom because its

goal was to protect universal rather than American freedoms. In his State of the Union speech he declared, “We have no intention of imposing our culture. But America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity; the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance.” Bush upheld the doctrine of militant decency by forcefully advocating acceptance of universal values.

The analysis of Bush’s speeches suggests several conclusions. We will consider implications relating to Bush’s advocacy, the theoretical constructs of presidential rhetoric, and international diplomacy. In assessing Bush’s arguments it is notable that he has achieved some important goals: he has guided the United States from a crisis situation to the leadership of an international war effort. He has also been able to gain domestic and international support for this war and to claim success for those actions. He has been able to do so because he skillfully made the case for war. He positioned America’s response as a righteous reaction to the intolerable acts of September 11. First, his interpretation of the situation called for a deliberate and forceful response. Second, he rhetorically demonstrated power to make Americans feel safe and to preempt future attacks. Third, he garnered empathy through his portrayal of American character in a time of crisis and he created an enemy that was shunned by the international community. Moreover, he defined this enemy without the convenience of automatic categories such as nationality or ethnicity. Finally, he presented an equation of social responsibility that defined the obligations of America in the global community. Within this equation America was a cooperative partner with her allies but would undertake any measure to achieve a just resolution.

Our analysis of Bush’s rhetorical achievements points to the inadequacy of current theories to explain the unique rhetorical nature of twenty-first century international crises. Theorists have traditionally separated crisis rhetoric from war rhetoric. In today’s climate of global terrorism, the traditional view of war has changed to include non-state-sponsored actors. These rhetorical categories, as Bush demonstrated, will blend out of necessity. The idea of militant decency may provide a blueprint for rhetoric addressing these situations. World leaders who want to justify military actions may have to consider how to demonstrate the righteousness of their actions as well as their force.

The consideration of the rhetorical justification for the War on Terrorism has international ramifications also. In the international community it is essential to

establish a clear warrant for the use of force and the violation of a nation's sovereignty. While international law may serve as a legal remedy to a conflict, any military intervention must be widely validated. This validation is achieved through rhetorical arguments. The discourse supporting the War on Terrorism was framed as a reaction. One area for future research would be the possibilities of using similar rhetoric as a rationale to provoke or initiate a conflict.

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