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THE RHETORIC OF WAR IN THE PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Introduction

This paper aims to explore public discourse in the speeches delivered by the American President George W. Bush, between September 11, 2001 and November 3 of the same year, in the aftermath of the attacks on America by Al Qaeda¹.

Although President Bush uses an array of words and expressions to prepare the nation for the 'war' which he subsequently wages, I have decided to use the way George Lakoff and Bruce Kochis frame the events of September 11, 2001. In addition to their labelling, I propose other frames of reference that give further insight into the discourse used by the President. What I wish to do is present a lexical-conceptual analysis through the subsequent analysis of the references on a lexical level and have divided them into four categories: 'war frame', 'evil frame', 'terror frame' and 'idiolect frame'.

Moreover, as text is defined as a form of social practice which tries to achieve its own purposes in forming a recipients' worldview and opinions, thus the second part of the analysis of data will present the ways in which a speaker persuades an audience to accept a given thesis: ethos, pathos and logos (according to GILL and WHEDBEE 1997).

Framing by B. KOCHIS and G. LAKOFF

BRUCE KOCHIS (2001 : para.1) claims that "we do not process events in atomized bits of separate information but in terms of larger 'chunks' of storytelling and to make sense of the event itself we need to interpret it in terms of already created whole stories. We adopt a frame and place when we interpret the world of events". However, Kochis says that 'frames are not always automatic, they do not always run smoothly'. What occurred on September 11 seems to be an example when normal frames failed to accommodate the

¹ All the speeches have been taken from Internet sources and are available on <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

event which took place, at least for a while as Kochis suggests. He distinguishes several frames: a psychological/emotional frame, the metaphysical/religion frame, criminal justice frame, war frame and a human rights frame.

KOCHIS (2001 : para.9) maintains that information is sometimes processed in terms of the psychological or emotional effect it has on us. He concludes that there were both positive and negative sides to the attacks of September 11. In reference to the first category he includes expressions of condolences from around the world and with reference to the second 'the sickening exuberance of some dancing in the street over the tragedy'.

President Bush responded to the attacks by stating on September 11 that, 'I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice'. Kochis maintains that 'Americans are quite familiar with this frame, either through their own personal encounters with law enforcement or through the thousands of images in popular culture depicting 'the goodie' getting the 'bad guy' - from films and TV series such as 'the Maltese Falcon', 'Perry Mason', 'Kojak' 'Colombo', 'Dirty Harry', 'Cops', 'Law and Order' all the way through to 'The Practice'.

LAKOFF (2001 : para.18) points out that the initial framing for the attack was a 'crime' with 'victims' and 'perpetrators' to be 'brought to justice' and 'punished'. The crime, however, entails the law, law courts, lawyers, trials, sentencing, appeals and subsequent processes, all of which are accommodated within the legal system. In a matter of weeks it became 'war' with 'casualties', 'enemies', 'military actions', 'war powers' and so on. The question Kochis (2001 : para.14) raises is whether or not the word 'war' is to be understood literally or metaphorically. Is this a real war or is it more like a 'war on drugs' or a 'war on cancer'?

The last frame Kochis reveals is the human rights frame. Since some people see the events of September 11 'as a crime against humanity', he comments that in this frame 'a human-being has rights to dignity, fair judicial proceedings and the processes of justice which are free of revenge and retribution'. He insists 'the human rights frame does not exclude the criminal justice frame'. However, the human rights frame requires that global citizens approach this issue not in terms of the rhetoric of national patriotism, but in terms of larger issues of global, that is, human justice'. (KOCHIS 2001 : para.13)

In addition to the above frames I have decided to propose the following additional frames that give further insight into the discourse used by the President.

'War' frame

The first category that includes 'war' terminology: 'acts of war', 'an act of war', 'this war', 'a new war'. Lakoff says that it was the Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and other administration officials who have pointed out that this situation does not fit today's understanding of war. At the point in question, that is, the immediate aftermath of the bombings, there are 'enemies' and 'casualties' but no obvious enemy with an army,

regiments, tanks, ships or air force, no obvious battlefields, strategic targets, and no clear 'victory'.

The suggestions may be put forward that because the concept of 'war' does not fit, there has been a conscious attempt to search for metaphors. Firstly, Bush calls the attackers 'cowards', but who is or is not a terrorist seems to be, and has always been, subjective. As history has recorded, George Washington was probably considered a terrorist by the British while at the same time Americans deemed him a freedom fighter.

President George W. Bush, when he announced the air strikes on October 7 said, 'We are a peaceful nation', which was endorsed by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. If we take into account the numerous countries with which America has been at war and bombed since World War II, this statement seems somehow to be at least questionable.

'Evil' frame

The second category centres on the word evil: 'evil acts', 'evil', 'these evil actions', 'the evil-doers struck', 'a new kind of evil', 'these acts of evil', 'the evil-doers have struck our nation'.

Thanks to the Bush Administration the power of such words as 'good' and 'evil' has escalated since September 11, 2001. The President uses righteous oratory in his presidential speeches. For example, in his Address to the Nation on September 11, he makes references to 'evil acts', and even quotes Psalm 23: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me'. In his September 14 address, President Bush elevates his rhetoric, claiming that America has a responsibility to 'rid the world of evil'. At the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, he invokes God, while drawing on the rhetoric of a preacher in interpreting God's words as 'not always the ones we look for'.

Further, in the remarks by the President upon his arrival at the White House on September 16, he used references to 'evil-doers' a total of nine times throughout his short statement and time after time referred to the terrorists as 'evil-doers'. Additionally, in a forty-four minute press conference on October 11, the word 'evil' occurred twelve times.

The notion of good and evil can be thought of as outdated concepts, which imploded on September 11 with the contrast portrayed between the terrorists on the one hand and fire fighters, police officers and rescue workers on the other. Using this particular word Bush seeks to justify action which is an inherent responsibility of any political figure, and in doing so, the rhetoric of evil justifies the military action subsequently undertaken by the United States.

When President George W. Bush addressed the Joint Session of Congress, his stance was decidedly polar; America is good, and terrorists are not just bad, they are evil. The polarity is apparent when he says, 'either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'. He leaves no possibility of a middle ground, for negotiation and discussion,

but instead rallies for a unified backing of his proposed retaliation and world-wide campaign against evil. It appears as if the President emerges from this statement as a 'global leader' demanding the rest of the world to take sides. President George W. Bush has famously revived the term 'evil' in the public arena, but while this may be perfectly fine for children, that is, a belief in fairy tales depicting 'pure good' versus 'pure evil' (where good always prevails) perhaps the President compromises his office by adopting what some may consider an infantile position.

'Terror' frame

The third category encompasses derivatives of the word 'terror': 'series of deliberate and deadly terrorist attacks', 'despicable acts of terror', 'terrorists attacks', 'terrorism', 'a terrorist attack', 'an age of terror', 'terrorist activity', 'acts of terror', 'terrorists acts against the United States'.

Before I attempt to analyse the above, let me first begin with the definition of terrorism and terror according to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary which states terrorism is 'the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion'. Terror is defined as 'violence committed by groups in order to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands' (1998 : 1906). In the above-mentioned definitions there is no reference to the ethnicity of a terrorist. However, after the attack on the World Trade Centre, people of middle-eastern descent became indisputably associated with terrorism (HOOVER 2001 : para.9). Hoover claims that this association is a product of media rhetoric.

It is interesting to examine the use of the word 'terrorism' in President Bush's discourse. He accuses Osama bin Laden of this practice. Bin Laden shakes off the accusation of terrorism that Bush has made, converting the word to 'revenge' taken on behalf of numerous innocent victims. President Bush similarly develops the notion of justice as a response to terrorism:

1. 'But one thing is for certain, these terrorists must be pursued, they must be defeated, and they must be brought to justice' (September 25)

In a deft association of terms, President Bush manages to link a varied series of words that have very positive connotations for his audience ('homeland', 'entrepreneurial spirit', 'spirit', and 'our country') and places them in opposition to the 'terrorists':

2. 'When the terrorists struck our homeland they thought we would fold. They thought our economy would crater. That's what they wanted. But they don't understand America. They don't understand the entrepreneurial spirit of our country. They don't understand the spirit of the working men and women of America'. (September 24).

'Idiolect' frame

The final frame considers patterns which do not fit into neat categories. The expressions appear in fact to be peculiar to the President's own idiolect. In other words, whereas the other frames drew heavily on well-established metaphors and readily understandable sources, this frame examines expressions which are not repetitive in nature, but rather appear to be poorly chosen. A fitting example of this is the use of the word *crusade*. President Bush's use of the word 'crusade', when discussing a response to the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, was quickly pointed out to be a linguistic faux pas, because of its historical connotations. With such a comment, he stoked up suspicion in some Arab and Muslim quarters where the word 'crusade' is a loaded term that recalls the Christians' medieval wars against Muslims in the Holy Land. His use of the word 'crusade', said Soheib Bensheikh, Grand Mufti of the mosque in Marseille, France, 'was most unfortunate' (FORD 2001 : para.4). The planned military operation had a name change, with the term 'operation infinite justice' which was pointed out to be seen as an insult to Muslims, who believe that only Allah can mete out infinite justice, consequently renamed as 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.

Another example of 'strange' terminology is the statement: 'hunt them down, those who did this to America' (September 16) which according to CHILTON (2001 : para.17) is the language of the Wild West. In this scenario America is seen as the sheriff, while the 'terrorists' are the Wild West outlaws. It seems that if America is the sheriff, the conclusion is that someone is breaking the law and consequently must be chased, caught and brought to justice. Of course, this illusion intimates even more that, when the Wild West concept is evoked, it conjures up images of bounty hunters and lawmen who themselves break the law so that their own brand of justice will be served.

President Bush compared Al Qaeda's members to animals when he said, 'and we're going to smoke them out of their caves, and get them running'. (September 24). Later he also said 'we will dry up the swamp they live in'. In the first, Lakoff (2001 : para.20) concludes that terrorists are spoken of as if they were rodents and in the second as if they were 'snakes or lowly swamp creatures'. According to him we have seen examples of conceptual metaphors: Moral Is Up and Immoral is Down (they are lowly) and Immoral People Are Animals (that live close to the ground).

Ethos, pathos and logos

The events of September 11, 2001 left many Americans feeling helpless and sceptical. President Bush's policy since that time seems to have taken advantage of the tragic occurrences to strengthen patriotism, heroism and apparently his popularity. The emotional circumstances that surrounded these speeches gave George W. Bush a window of opportunity to develop his ethos. The president was able to do so by using first person singular statements, for instance:

3. 'Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency response plans'. (September 11)
4. 'I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice'. (September 11)

President Bush organizes the logos of the situation in a way which the audience feels as one and patriotic, instead of threatened and pessimistic. This partiality resonates when he states:

5. 'America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world' (September 11).

He strategically leaves out information about the reasons pertaining to why Americans may have been attacked and blames the attack on jealousy. Let us have a look at the following quotation:

6. 'The victims were in aeroplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbours'. (September 11)

President Bush's oratory is most often characterised with an appeal to ethos that portrays him as a 'fellow citizen'. Bush tends to use 'we' in lieu of 'I', as in, 'we're the brightest beacon', 'we go forward to defend freedom'. This presents him as a fellow American, sympathetic to the common people. In the same speech on September 11, he especially mentions women, secretaries and moms first.

Determination and confidence are immediately written into his ethos with his comment 'Make no mistake about it' (September 16). Bush also develops the logos by calling the tragedy 'cowardly acts', which leads listeners to infer that there is an enemy, but the enemy is a coward in comparison to the strong and heroic United States. In reality the terrorists are not necessarily cowardly, but Bush wants them to appear cowardly. His language is not concerned with transmitting truth but rather is concerned with creating truth. Those terrorists are 'cowardly' because Bush says they are; they become 'cowardly' at the moment he says those words on condition that the audience agrees with him.

The concept of logos in Bush's speech may be the hardest of the proofs to understand at first sight when examining his speeches. For instance, looking at specific word use (September 14), Bush employed an immense amount of religious jargon. Phrases such as, 'On bended knees in prayer' and 'May God bless America', appealed to pathos and logos as well as religion. President Bush does not use logos, pathos, or ethos alone but rather uses them in unison.

Concluding remarks

President Bush declared: 'Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' (September 20). The US president outlined a programme of limitless and perpetual war (I have decided to use Lakoff's nomenclature here), on every continent, and against any regime that refuses to obey Washington's dictates, saying that any regime to do so 'will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime'. On the other hand, he described the enemy as a 'fringe' element of Islamic fundamentalists, amounting to some thousand terrorists spread out over 60 countries. Yet, the message from the White House is that this minuscule group poses a direct threat to America and the entire 'civilized world' and that only the sustained use of military force would suffice to defeat it.

Lakoff reads danger into this military response by way of what it lacks, saying that 'with no definition of victory and no exit strategy we may be entering a state of perpetual war'. He continues that 'this would be very convenient for the conservative domestic agenda: The war machine will determine the domestic agenda, which will allow conservatives to do whatever they want in the name of national security'. Some argue that such a policy gave the White House and the Pentagon a free hand to take military action against almost everyone, anywhere.

The military phase of the War against Terrorism began on October 7, 2001 under the name 'Operation Enduring Freedom.' President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld stated that it was a different kind of war against a different kind of enemy – this, because the enemy is not named as a nation, but instead, terrorist networks that threaten the way of life of all peaceful people.

President Bush, speaking at the White House on March 11, called on the rest of the 'civilised world' to join him in the war against terrorism. He praised some twenty countries, and referred repeatedly to the 'community of civilised nations' engaged in common struggle. Every terrorist, he said, 'must be made to live as an international fugitive with no place to hide, no government to hide behind and not even a safe place to sleep'. The mission, Bush declared, would only end 'when the work is finished, when terror networks of global reach have been destroyed – and they will be destroyed'.

The conclusions drawn indicate that President George W. Bush, in his capacity as the leading statesman of the USA, wielded as much power through the execution of the language he chose to address the nation and the world. He did this as commander-in-chief of what may well be the world's most effective military force.

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