

GEORGE W. BUSH, "AN ADDRESS TO A JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS
AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE" (20 September 2001)

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Abstract: George W. Bush's speech before a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, outlined how the nation would respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11. President Bush outlined a bold plan of action, framing the issue in antithetical terms—as a war between good and evil. This framing helped account for the strong public support Bush initially enjoyed as he pushed for congressional approval of his policies in the war on terror.

Key Words: George W. Bush, September 11, Al-Qaeda, terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, USA Patriot Act

George W. Bush's first term as president of the United States was defined by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Nineteen members of Al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial jets and flew two of them into the World Trade Center in New York, another into the Pentagon, and the fourth—supposedly destined for the White House or the Capitol building—crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. The sudden, unexpected nature of the attack and the mass casualties that resulted shocked the American public.

Nine days later, on September 20, 2001, President Bush delivered a speech before a joint session of Congress, outlining how America would respond to the terrorist attacks. President Bush captured the mood of the nation and outlined a bold plan of action in this pivotal address. The speech evoked the still vivid memories of the week-old attack and framed the conflict in starkly antithetical ways, laying the groundwork for a dramatic response. In particular, the speech made heavy use of antitheses throughout, including the now famous line directed toward the world's nations: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (30).¹ This rhetorical tactic helped build support for major policy initiatives like the USA Patriot Act, as well for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By depicting the war on terrorism as a conflict between good and evil, Bush sketched a rhetorical blueprint for all of his administration's subsequent actions. This essay will first consider the historical and political antecedents to the speech, then analyze the speech itself and its repercussions.

The Bush Presidency—Before 9/11

The Bush presidency started on unstable footing. The election in 2000 between Bush and Vice-President Al Gore was one of the closest in U.S. history. The drama of the election was on full display as Bush and Gore struggled over Florida's electoral votes—the winner of that state would win the presidency, even though Gore had won the popular vote. After a

protracted legal battle, Bush was declared the 42nd president of the United States. Writing in the *American Prospect*, political commentator Kevin Phillips expressed the feelings of many as he labeled the newly elected president "His Fraudulency."²

Bush's first Inaugural Address was a relatively short speech. The speech centered around the theme of reconciliation, as Bush tried to establish his legitimacy despite his narrow victory. Even though the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives, they controlled only fifty seats in the U.S. Senate, so the cooperation of Democrats would be critical to the success of Bush's agenda. Bush's Inaugural Address emphasized the shared ideals, values, and heritage of all Americans in an effort to reach out to Democrats. He even complimented challenger Al Gore for conceding the election "with grace," which communicated to other Democrats that they ought to do the same.³ The *Washington Post* reported that Bush's "eloquent speech focused primarily on the overriding reality that confronts him, which is the need to provide reassurance to, and find common ground with, his opponents if his presidency is to succeed."⁴ The speech also identified several issues at the top of his agenda, including educational reform, a new weapons system, and support for religious charities.

The first months of Bush's presidency brought a mixture of good and bad news for the new chief executive. In September, *MSNBC* reported that his approval rating stood at 55 percent.⁵ Yet the economy was doing poorly by many accounts, with the *New York Times* reporting on September 10 that the economic growth rate had dropped 4.5 percent over the last year and that unemployment had increased a full percentage point, raising concerns about a possible recession.⁶ Bush also was criticized for being the "vacation president,"⁷ as he spent a large part of his first summer in office at his ranch outside of Crawford, Texas. On *Face the Nation*, Dan Balz observed that the Democrats were trying to "remind people that George W. Bush was not working as hard as the American people might have wanted him to work."⁸ To make matters worse, James Jeffords, a Republican Senator from Vermont, switched his party affiliation to Independent on May 24, 2001, thereby giving control of the Senate to the Democrats.

On the more positive side, the president's Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act passed both the House and Senate by a comfortable margin. The president also had success building a bipartisan coalition behind his proposals for educational reform.⁹ In addition, the president made significant progress in calming tensions with Russia over his plans to build a missile defense system.¹⁰ Only nine months after taking office, however, the president's domestic and international agenda was radically altered by the events of September 11, 2001. The attacks of September 11th would forever define the presidential legacy of George W. Bush.

The Bush Presidency—After 9/11

The days following the September 11 attacks were chaotic as the world tried to come to terms with how this monumental event would shape the future. The Democrats had been planning a major political offensive for September 12, designed to criticize the president for his tax cuts. Instead of bickering on the floor of Congress, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt and House Speaker Dennis Hastert spent September 12 beneath the Capitol in a reinforced bunker, which was more time than they had spent together in the previous two years.¹¹ This

national crisis produced a bond that extended beyond those directly in danger; across the country, Americans joined together in solemn prayer and displays of patriotism. With the exception of isolated street celebrations in a few countries, the response from the global community to the attacks was generally supportive of the United States. The French newspaper *Le Monde's* headline was "Nous sommes tous Américains" ("We are all Americans").¹² For the first time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a defense alliance made up of twenty-six nations from North America and Europe, invoked Article 5, which binds members to regard an attack on one as an attack on all of the member nations. The European Union announced a summit on terrorism to be held on September 21.¹³ And Russian President Vladimir Putin personally called off military exercises as an expression of solidarity.¹⁴ The world thus offered a show of emotional and political support of the United States that was unmatched in recent memory.

On September 14, President Bush made his first public appearance after the attacks by attending a prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral. Bush instructed his aides to include leaders of all the major faiths and denominations in the service.¹⁵ That same day, Bush traveled to New York and spoke from the top of a crushed fire truck to a gathering of clergy and rescue workers. Responding to a rescue worker who could not hear, the president said: "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!"¹⁶ This message of action was seized upon by Americans, uncertain of their future and eager to strike back at the forces responsible for the devastation. Bush's popularity skyrocketed; his job approval rose from approximately fifty-five percent to eighty-four percent. Seven in ten Americans now were saying President Bush was a strong leader, including 55 percent of Democrats.¹⁷

On September 18, White House counselor Karen P. Hughes instructed speechwriters Michael Gerson, Matthew Scully, and John McConnell, to begin working on what would become Bush's speech before the Joint Session of Congress.¹⁸ The next two days were spent making numerous alterations to the speech and consulting with Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had flown to the United States in the aftermath of the attacks. Bush discussed with Blair and his National Security Council the importance of capitalizing on American patriotism and pro-American sentiment around the world. The newspapers outlined the enormous expectations placed on the speech. Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democratic Senator from New York and former first lady, extended her support in advance of the speech. Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, told the American public that the speech would outline the U.S. response to the attacks. George Stephanopoulos, an ABC news correspondent and former Democratic political advisor, called it "the speech of his life"—the kind that only happens "a handful of times in our history."¹⁹ When President Bush delivered the speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, eighty million American television viewers tuned in.²⁰ The next day several major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, included the full transcript of the historic address.

Defining the Enemy

The rhetorical situation created by September 11 was very complex. The fear and helplessness provoked by the images of an attack on American soil called for reassurances

about the nation's security. The events of 9/11 created fear and shock, and President Bush, as commander-in-chief, responded to the nation's emotional trauma. The speech opened with a direct acknowledgement of American sacrifice and bravery: "In the normal course of events, Presidents come to this Chamber to report on the state of the Union. Tonight, no such report is needed. It has already been delivered by the American people" (2). Bush thus worked to reassure the American people that such national adversity could help bring out the best of the American spirit.

Democracies face unique constraints when preparing to engage in conflict; unlike in monarchies or dictatorships, popular support is typically necessary not only to sustain military action, but also to initiate conflict. A large part of making war palatable to the public in a democratic society involves convincing them that they are fighting a necessary and ethically just war that is undertaken only after all other alternatives have been exhausted. Robert Ivie outlines three binaries frequently deployed in American presidential war rhetoric to depict the potential enemy and to build a case for war. The first binary is that of "force vs. Freedom," which defines an enemy determined to promulgate their political ideologies through violent means, as opposed to the United States, which is depicted as a model of freedom.²¹ The second binary is that of "irrational vs. rational," where a savage and lawless enemy is portrayed in opposition to the order and stability of the United States.²² Ivie defines the third binary as "Aggression vs. Defense," which characterizes the enemy as engaged in a premeditated and aggressive use of force; conversely, the United States is portrayed as a nation that uses force only to defend itself.²³ By defining the enemy as alien, dangerous, and incapable of reasoned judgment, these rhetorical strategies can help presidents build the popular support for military action.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson expand on the characteristics of presidential war discourse. These rhetorical scholars outline five characteristics typical of presidential war addresses. The first involves reassurances from the president that he is not acting hastily or out of anger, but instead has carefully weighed all of the options. Such arguments help portray the president as a level-headed commander-in-chief who has carefully considered the situation while steadfastly mindful of the lives that could be lost in the process. The second is a narrative that describes the threat that the enemy poses to the nation or to civilization itself. This narrative helps simplify complex issues in a way that compels action. The third characteristic is a call for unity as the nation prepares to combat external threats. The fourth characteristic is the presentation of detailed information about the threat posed by an enemy. Omitting this specific information opens a president up to accusations of "warmongering," which could undermine his call to action. The final characteristic is "strategic misrepresentation" of the situation." Instead of attributing such deception to a particular president, Campbell and Jamieson describe misrepresentation as virtually necessary to persuade people in a democracy to grant a president the power to effectively wage war.²⁴

President Bush had all these strategies available to him, but the September 11th attacks were unlike previous American conflicts. Early intelligence reports in the days following the attacks linked the violence to Al-Qaeda, a loosely organized Islamic terrorist network under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, the 17th son of a wealthy Saudi construction magnate.²⁵ Al-Qaeda developed from the mujahedeen fighters who flocked from around the world to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. George Tenet, President Bush's C.I.A. director,

was convinced that bin Laden was still in Afghanistan, working in close association with the Taliban government. In fact, the United States government had been deploying Special Forces to the country and supporting the Northern Alliance, a collection of Afghan tribes opposed to Taliban rule.²⁶ President Bush sought to redefine the nature of America's struggle against Al-Qaeda and extend this conflict formally to include Afghanistan. President Bush accomplished this goal by painting a picture of a world engulfed in a war between good and evil that extended beyond any one country or any one time period. The speech contrasted the humanity of the American people with the inhumanity of the attackers. This antithesis between good and evil was at the heart of the speech. The speech was also notable because it introduced the concept of a "war on terror."

The opposition of "good" and "evil" was evident throughout the speech. For instance, Bush repeatedly contrasted "justice" and "freedom" with images of the "enemy." He used strong historical allusions to make this point, explicitly comparing terrorism to German fascism. He stated: "By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they [the terrorists] follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism" (27). Most Americans viewed Nazism as the ultimate in human evil. Bush lumped Al-Qaeda with Nazism as well as totalitarianism and fascism, two other ideological enemies that the United States had battled in the past. Given this framing, Al-Qaeda could have no legitimate grievance with the United States; instead they were portrayed as a continuation of evil historical forces determined to undermine freedom.

President Bush further depicted the extremism of the attackers by describing their beliefs as a "fringe form of Islamic extremism" (15). Here, Bush's antithesis contrasted extremism with mainstream Islamic thought. Moreover, Bush contrasted these fringe beliefs with the fundamental organizing principles of civilized society, identifying that the war on terror as "civilization's fight" (35). The civilized/barbarian antithesis here was blunt and unapologetic; the terrorists were not like "us," Bush argued; rather, they were outside the bounds of justice and civilization. Bush used the contrast between civilization and barbarianism to explain why the United States was attacked:

Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what they see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. (24)

This particular argument relieved America of any responsibility for terrorism. The argument deflected any suggestion of backlash, or the idea that American interventionism abroad might have created hostility toward America.²⁷ Instead, the speech attributed the terrorists' anger to their hatred for "freedom." John M. Murphy writes that this word choice has important implications for how the audience was asked to relate to the enemy. Bush's language implied that the enemy had no real grievances. Instead, they represented pure evil, committed only to undermining freedom.²⁸ Since Americans would never compromise their freedom, Bush's language identified the terrorists as an enemy who could not be bargained with. In the process, he reassured the American people of their innocence and of the superiority of their ideals. The speech reflected a world view in which Americans were peaceful and just, while the terrorists

were jealous and resentful of America's freedom and democratic ideals. The antitheses in the address dramatized how America was the innocent victim of an unprovoked attack, thus warranting unprecedented domestic security measures, more stringent law enforcement measures, new intelligence mechanisms, and what many would come to view as a preemptive military policy.

Bush further placed the enemy in the role of barbarian by depicting them as warring against civilization across the globe. Bush argued: "They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa" (25). Bush's depiction worked to ally the United States with other Middle Eastern and Asian nations, suggesting that Al-Qaeda was not only opposed to the United States, but also committed to spreading chaos and conflict across the globe. By portraying Al-Qaeda in opposition to Muslim governments, President Bush further emphasized the idea that Al-Qaeda represented a fringe form of Islam.

Bush continued to exploit the antithesis between "good" and "evil" by dividing the global community into "friends" and "enemies." He argued: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (30). This language divided the conflict into two competing factions, furthering the narrative of an epic struggle. By removing all shades of gray, Bush rendered the conflict a simple struggle between good and evil. As Campbell and Jamieson contend, "The justification for military intervention is embodied in a dramatic narrative from which, in turn, an argument is extracted."²⁹ One of Bush's primary arguments for war was that Afghanistan's leaders had been complicit with Al-Qaeda and thus must be viewed as an enemy of the United States.

The Call to Respond

After defining the enemy, Bush laid the ground work for his proposed response to the threat. Explaining the typical progression of war discourse, Wayne Fields argues that "virtually all calls for war are formulaic, and for every country the narration of offenses by a dishonorable foe, no matter how credible, must precede a formal declaration of one's own intent."³⁰ The construction of evil for President Bush, helped justify the clear ultimatum that he issued to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan:

Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.(20)

While preparing the speech, Bush and his advisors reportedly concluded that it was unlikely that the Taliban government would give in to these demands.³¹ In demanding that Afghanistan give "full access" (20) and "act immediately" without "negotiation or discussion" (21), Bush

effectively called on that nation to surrender its sovereignty to the United States. By presenting a set of actions which Afghanistan could take to avoid conflict, however, Bush nevertheless suggested to the American people that he was not eager for war, which reinforced one of the five characteristics that Campbell and Jamieson identify as critical to securing popular support for military action. And if there was any question about Bush's definition of an enemy nation, he reiterated his warning that the U.S. would not tolerate any sort of support for Al-Qaeda: "From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime"(30).

One of the difficulties President Bush faced was how to respond to an attack by forces not clearly aligned with any particular nation. Victory over Afghanistan would not necessarily translate into victory over Al-Qaeda, which was believed to be operating in many countries. Bush sought to address this paradox by defining the U.S. conflict broadly, as a "war on terror" (23). Prior to this speech, terrorism had typically been defined in criminal rather than military terms.³² When responding to criminals, one thought of arrests and public trials, as in the conviction of Egyptian cleric Omar Abdel-Rahman after he allegedly masterminded the 1993 World Trade Center bombings.³³ Prior to September 11, 2001, a more likely response might have been economic "warfare," employing such mechanisms as freezing assets or economic sanctions against states sponsoring terrorism.³⁴ Bush's rhetoric of war warranted a very different response. Addressing this issue directly, President Bush suggested a more comprehensive strategy: "How will we fight and win this war? We will direct every resource at our command—every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war—to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network"(28). The president thus emphasized the changes that 9/11 had brought to the nation's war on terror: "Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes"(30).

The international response represented only half of President Bush's strategy for the war on terror. The other half centered on safeguarding the nation from future terrorist attacks, which foreshadowed his support for the USA Patriot Act (2001). This legislation included restrictions on civil liberties in order to promote greater security at home, much like legislation passed during World War I (e.g., the Espionage Act of 1917) or the Cold War (e.g., the Espionage and Sabotage Act of 1954). These restrictions raised a rhetorical quandary of sorts for the president, given that his speech accentuated the antithesis between terrorism and American freedom. Bush, however, reasoned that defeating terrorism and keeping the nation safe outweighed any short-term "inconveniences" (42) that might result from restrictions on civil liberties.

Bush proposed several specific domestic measures to combat terrorism in his speech of September 20, 2001. First, he proposed the creation of the "Office of Homeland Security," which would entail consolidating 22 different agencies and 180,000 federal employees into a single department (31).³⁵ Second, Bush outlined a plan for stricter airport security, including placing air marshals on flights (46). Finally, Bush argued that stronger law enforcement tools were necessary to find terrorists within the United States. He argued: "We will come together to give law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home. We will come together to strengthen our intelligence capabilities to know the plans of terrorists before they act, and find them before they strike" (47). Bush assumed here that support for

these measures would be strong; indeed, part of the healing process would involve shoring up domestic security. Times of extreme peril in society make calls for restrictions on civil liberties more reasonable.³⁶ Bush assured his audience on September 20 that such measures were necessary to win the long, difficult struggle that lay ahead:

[I]t is natural to wonder if America's future is one of fear. Some speak of an age of terror. I know there are struggles ahead, and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them. As long as the United States of American is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world. (50)

Bush thus drew a distinction between long-term challenges and short-term sacrifices. Implicit in his argument was the notion that short-term restrictions on freedom were necessary for the preservation of freedom in the long run. However, Bush did not talk of restricting "freedom" per se; the address suggested that tighter security would result merely in "delays and inconveniences" (42). Bush assured his listeners that those sacrifices would only be temporary; he envisioned a time when "life will return almost to normal" (52). The sacrifices he asked his audience to make were merely short-term "inconveniences" necessary to win the war on terror.

The president thus called upon Americans to accept limits on our democratic freedoms in order to defeat an enemy motivated by an irrational "hate" for those very freedoms: "our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other" (24). Indeed, freedom and fear were "at war" (51), according to Bush, and he promised to safeguard our basic freedoms in the conduct of that war: "We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them" (39). Above all, however, the nation needed to be "secure," and that meant waging all-out war against the enemy. If "freedom" were to triumph over "fear," Bush concluded, then terrorism had to be defeated.

The Legacy of President Bush's September 20, 2001 Address

The September 11 terrorist attacks represented one of the greatest catastrophes in American history. Clearly, they demanded a strong response from President George W. Bush. The only question was what form that response would take. Bush's speech before the Joint Session of Congress laid out a new strategy for countering the terrorist threat. Internationally, Bush called for a war against terrorist organizations and the nations that harbored them. Domestically, Bush called for more stringent law enforcement and intelligence gathering measures. Bolstered by soaring poll numbers and a new sense of national unity following the attacks, the president was able to begin implementing his new vision of national defense. Congress passed the USA Patriot Act, which was signed into law on October 26, 2001. The bill reduced many of the legal barriers to law enforcement's ability to detain suspects and search for evidence. In the U.S. Senate, the bill passed with a lone dissenting vote, cast by Russ Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin. Congress also passed a bill giving the president the authority to use all necessary force in responding to the terrorist attacks, which Bush used to justify sending U.S. troops into Afghanistan. California Democratic Barbara Lee cast the lone

dissenting vote against that measure.³⁷ In February 2002, polls showed that only about six percent of Americans were opposed to the nation's military actions in Afghanistan, evidencing the strong level of support for this military intervention.³⁸

As President Bush continued to champion the war on terror, he returned time and again to the same antithetical rhetoric, frequently invoking the dichotomy between good and evil. Denise M. Bostdorff has noted the same dichotomous world view in Bush's description of North Korea, Iran and Iraq as the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address.³⁹ Bush's speech on September 20, 2001, thus reflects not just a response to 9/11 attacks, but a new rhetorical and political paradigm for addressing the world's problems. The same depictions of good vs. evil helped Bush win support for his invasion of Iraq, which had even more congressional support than his father's invasion of that nation during the first Persian Gulf War.⁴⁰ Peggy Noonan, a former speech writer for both Ronald Reagan and Bush's father, attributed the younger Bush's success to his ability to simplify the complexities of international politics with clear and unambiguous language.⁴¹

As we write this essay, however, support for Bush's war on terror has wavered. The president's polling numbers have dropped to record lows,⁴² the USA Patriot Act faced a tough renewal fight in 2006 despite a Republican-controlled Congress,⁴³ and public support for the war in Iraq has faltered.⁴⁴ During the November 2006 midterm elections, Democrats made impressive gains, in part, because of opposition to the war in Iraq. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, the results of the 2006 elections "shook the Bush administration to its core."⁴⁵

At present, it is unclear what the future may hold with the U.S. presence in Iraq. Democrats recently removed a timetable for withdraw of U.S. military forces from a bill authorizing additional funding for the Iraq war,⁴⁶ suggesting that the U.S. presence in Iraq may go on for some time. The debate continues to rage over the war's effects on American security. The Bush administration has argued for a continued U.S. presence in Iraq, declaring: "We're taking the fight to the terrorists abroad so we do not have to face them here at home."⁴⁷ Yet Bruce Riedel, a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, has argued that the Iraq war has actually galvanized support for terrorist organizations hostile to the United States.⁴⁸ In addition, critics of the war contend that both the Iraq war and the so-called Bush Doctrine have strained relations between the United States and many of its allies, including France and Germany.⁴⁹

As the 2008 presidential election nears, questions about the nation's future course in the war on terror will no doubt be at the top of the campaign agenda. Candidates from both parties disagree over domestic security programs like the USA Patriot Act, as well as over the best course of action in the U.S.-Iraq war. In addition, America's strained relations with Iran have become a campaign issue. While it remains to be seen what actions will be taken on all of these fronts, it is certain that there will be heated and divisive debate. Bush's rhetorical framing of the September 11 attacks as a contest between good and evil initially won him broad support for his war on terror, but as the war in Iraq drags on, that support has clearly eroded.

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Notes

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