The Rhetoric of Crisis:
George W. Bush during the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

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ABSTRACT: This article expands presidential rhetoric research by analyzing presidential speeches during times of crisis. Specifically, we examine the rhetoric of George W. Bush in the beginning of the war in Afghanistan and the subsequent fall of Kabul, and the start of the Iraq war and the subsequent fall of Baghdad. Utilizing computer-assisted text analysis software (Diction 6.0), we evaluate whether President Bush was more likely to employ language that was inspirational, hardship-oriented, aggressive, embellishing, liberating, or religious during these events. We argue that crises shape the type of language used by the president, especially when trying to achieve their political goals.

Keywords: political communication, crisis, presidential rhetoric, content analysis, Diction

Introduction

The build-up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were rife with political debates, not unlike most political arguments about potential military conflicts. President George W. Bush proffered arguments to the American people in an effort to galvanize support for entering into both conflicts, trying to persuade the people that such an effort was needed in order to assuage the possibility of even larger crises down the line. In this paper, we ask the following questions: How does the president go about persuading the American people? Does the president employ specific, perhaps contrived, political language to build support for military actions? Here, we argue that the president did indeed utilize specific language in the build-up to both crises, and that his language did, in fact, change as he pursued his political goals.

The notion that presidents use programmatic rhetoric to achieve their goals is not new, particularly in the wake of the Modern Presidency (Ceaser et al., 1981; Bostdorff, 1994). Political leaders are known for their use of strong and decisive rhetoric during crises (Yukl, 2002; Murphy, 2003; Althaus & Largio, 2004; Bligh et al., 2004a, b; Jamieson, 2007; Lockett et al., 2007; Domke & Coe, 2008; Stam et al., 2016; Kraybill, Mirkazemi & Villegas, 2017), as well as their use of persuasive language (Ceaser et al., 1981, Baum, 2004; Bitzer, 1968; Hoffmann, 2005; Zarefsky, 2004; Coe, 2007; Smith, 2010; Schroedel et al., 2013). Through a case study, we examine the rhetoric of President Bush from the onset of specific crises to the end of it (specifically, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars) , seeking to determine if specific types of speech – such as those invoking inspiration, hardship, aggression, liberation, religion, and embellishment – are used.

Previous works have looked at President Bush's language in terms of the role of leadership rhetoric vis-à-vis 9/11 (Bligh et al., 2004a, 2004b; Druckman and Holmes, 2004; Berggren and Rae, 2006; Coe, 2007; Smith,

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2008; Schroedel et al., 2013). Others have examined how George W. Bush strategically used rhetoric post-9/11 (John et al., 2007), employed charismatic language (Bligh et al 2004b), or how he emphasized words, such as good and evil (Ivie, 2007). Murphy (2003) examines how Bush utilized rhetoric to alter Americans' interpretation of 9/11. Murphy's (2003) work builds on Dow's (1989), which examines how crisis rhetoric can help facilitate the need for policy approval. Some scholars have qualitatively dissected the rhetoric of the administration within the framework of political lying – or "Bushspeak" – in the events leading up to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Kellner, 2007).

Literature Review

Rhetoric and Crisis

In terms of presidential rhetoric in times of crisis, Wallace et al. (1993), argues that crises involve threats to important values or national survival. Pillai and Meindl (1998) argue it gives leaders an opportunity to take "bold" action. In fact, Cherwitz & Zagacki (1986) note that prior to military efforts, government officials tend to shift their rhetoric to a more justificatory language to persuade the citizenry. Bostdorff (1991, 1994) argues that a crisis entails a critical moment of decisiveness, and exists when a president labels it as such. Thus, presidents can be thought to inherently promote crises when they present a claim or issue to the public and link it to a political necessity, threatened values, or if there are electoral consequences at risk (Kernel, 1997; Smith, 1996; Schultz, 2001; Baum, 2004).

Crisis, Presidential Rhetoric, and Electoral Consequences

A particularly useful strand of literature that we build on is political rhetoric and electoral consequences. Previous scholars (Kernel, 1997; Smith, 1996; Schultz, 2001; Baum, 2004) demonstrate that political leaders who are accountable to a domestic constituency in times of international crises will amp up their rhetoric with either threats or promises (Smith, 1996; Schultz, 2001). Schultz (2001) and Baum (2004) both find that democratically elected leaders have an incentive not to attract public scrutiny when confronting crises. Yet, if the stakes are relatively modest, leaders tend to increase levels of communication, considering there is a reasonable likelihood of success (Baum 2004). Furthermore, McAllister (2006) examines how, despite suffering declining

approval, the Bush camp mobilized and primed voters on the Iraq war, linking the crisis to terrorism and threats to national security. As will be discussed, the rhetorical appeals surrounding the invasion of Iraq ties into our argument that Bush used embellishing terms in his public speeches to justify his actions.

Religion and Presidential Rhetoric

In his seminal work on civil religion, Bellah (1967) discusses the history of presidents employing religious language, demonstrating its entanglement with politics. Domke and Coe (2008) also argue that religion serves as part of the "political subtext" in the United States and that presidents use religious language as a political weapon, as part of a "God strategy," to strategically consolidate political support. In their examination of presidential speeches stemming from FDR to George W. Bush, Domke and Coe (2008) note the use of this type of rhetoric was crystalized and most notable with Bush. Similarly, Smith (2008) notes that George W. Bush used distinctive forms of moral and religious expression more so than any other prior modern president, even during the debate over preemptive strikes leading up to the Iraq war.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Building on the previous literature, we examine President Bush's rhetoric during distinct periods of crises, specifically at the onset of the "War on Terror." We address the following research questions: 1) Does the president's rhetoric change at the onset of a crisis? 2) Does it change depending on the crisis? We expect that (H1) the president's language will change at the onset of a crisis and will vary depending on the nature of the crisis. For example, we expect (H2) the president to use more inspirational rhetoric at the onset of a crisis, and more so during the beginning of the Afghanistan crisis. We also expect (H3) the president to use more hardship-oriented language during the onset of both crises, but particularly during the invasion of Iraq; conversely, while we expect (H4) aggressive language to be used at the onset of both wars, we predict more of it with the crisis in Afghanistan. Additionally, because of the state of political affairs prior to the war in Iraq, we expect (H5) more embellishing rhetoric to be used at the start of only the Iraq war. Likewise, because of the nature of the lead up to the war in Iraq, we expect (H6) the president to use more religious language with said conflict compared to the war in Afghanistan. Finally, we

expect (H7) more liberation-oriented rhetoric at the onset – and throughout – the war in Iraq compared to Afghanistan.

Method

Data and Method

We utilize a sample of primary data, comprised of 280 speeches made by President Bush over the course of his first term. All speeches were collected via the State Department's website of archived remarks, testimony, speeches, and briefings. Some supplemental data was also collected via PresidentialRhetoric.com to ensure that our database encompasses as many publicly available speeches during the president's first term as possible.

Before analyzing the content of the speeches, each document was coded to omit any language not employed by President Bush. Inserts, referencing pauses, applauses, or laughter, were omitted to focus on the president's own language. To analyze the speeches, we employ a Computer Assisted Textual Analysis (CATA) program, Diction 6.0, which allows us to impartially analyze the rhetoric used during Bush's presidency. Diction is designed to capture language that is political in nature, and because the job of the president is political by nature, Diction is an obvious CATA methodology to use (Bligh et al., 2004a; Bligh et al., 2004b, Hart & Jarvis, 1997; Schuh & Miller, 2006).

To examine the language used by President Bush at the onset of both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and to isolate for both the fall of Kabul and Baghdad, respectively, we first group both events into respective dummy variables (0 = any speech outside of each individual crisis, 1 = any speech that is part of the crisis) so that comparisons can be made both to one another, and to the rest of the dataset. We define the date range associated with the war in Afghanistan and the fall of Kabul as any speech made between October 7, 2001 to November 13, 2001 (Thompson, 2014; Capture of Kabul). We define the date range associated with the war in Iraq and the fall of Baghdad as any speech made between March 19, 2003 to April 9, 2003 (Sanger and Burns, 2003; The Fall of Baghdad). The sample associated with the war in Afghanistan contains a total of six speeches, while the sample associated with the war in Iraq contains a total of twelve speeches. Though the N on both events are small, we are simply aiming to control for both time periods to get a better understanding of whether the rhetoric of crisis is fundamentally different than the language employed at other points during the president's term. Limiting the time periods in the manner described is advantageous because it allows us to focus on two of the most significant events in both crises. Again, although we pull out several speeches and thus limit our sample, we do so to both test how presidential rhetoric is employed during times of crisis, and to get a better understanding of how crisis-oriented rhetoric is different from language during periods of relative normalcy. Please note, we are not claiming that the normal (day-to-day/routine) speeches of a president are absent of a notable style, or that it lacks substance. What we are arguing is that when the president is facing a crisis, such as the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, he utilizes a distinctly different type of rhetoric.

Variables

Inspiration. Borrowing from Bligh et al. (2004a), we utilize the language construct denoting inspiration to capture speech that is patriotic. This language captures speech that entails virtues of universal respect, desirable moral qualities (self-sacrifice and virtue), attractive qualities (such as courage and dedication), as well as social and political ideals, like patriotism and justice (Diction 6.0 Help Manual, 2012). Scholars have found that inspirational speech is indicative of strong and decisive leadership and may be of particular importance during crises (Stewart, 1967; Suedfeld & Dennis, 1976; Yukl, 2002). We expect to find more inspirational language at the onset of crisis, particularly in the war in Afghanistan, since the onset of this crisis occurred as a result of 9/11.

Hardship. Crisis and conflict that stems from it inevitably entail hardship. Language that is hardship-oriented focuses on hostile actions (such as enemies), and "unsavory political outcomes" (Diction 6.0 Help Manual, 2012). Hart (2004) also discusses how hardship-oriented language tends to be associated with conflict. We expect the president to employ more hardship-orientated language at the onset of the Iraq war, since the administration arguably faced greater unsavory political outcomes in garnering support for the invasion.

Aggression. Diction 6.0 (2012) categorizes aggressive language as, "embracing forceful action, terms that denote social domination (conquest, attacking, dictatorships, violations), and goal-directedness (crusade, commanded,

challenging, overcome)." Research shows there is a relationship between aggressive language and expressive words employed after a terrorist attack (Fernandez, Paez & Pennebaker, 2009; Pennebaker, Groom, Leow & Dabbs, 2004). Further, Kellner (2007) notes that President Bush utilized aggressive and 'hyperbolic' rhetoric in describing the "War on Terror" in terms of good versus evil. We expect that President Bush used more aggressive rhetoric at the onset of the Afghan war, particularly because this crisis spurred as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Embellishment. Calling into question some of the claims the Bush Administration, Jamieson (2007) notes that questionable language was used to sell the Iraq war. Jamieson's recounting of the lead up to the war give us reasonable suspicion that the Administration may have employed embellishing language in their claims regarding WMDs. Diction 6.0 (2012) describes such embellishment-orientated language as concepts with heavy modifications and can de-emphasize human and material action. We expect that President Bush used more embellishment-oriented language at the onset of the crisis in Iraq compared to the crisis in Afghanistan.

Religion. As previously discussed, religious rhetoric is not exempt from presidential politics and thus, should not be excluded in a discussion on presidential crisis rhetoric. We construct a religious dictionary in Diction to capture broad and common terms of faith, God, religion, and Christianity. The goal of this category is to identify a general use of religious language employed by the president during crises. Specifically, this category consists of the following terms: angel, confession, faith, miracle, and mission, pray, proverb, sacred, sin and worship. We also make use Eidenmuller's (2002) religious dictionary, which is comprised of the following terms: believer, Bible, born-again, Christ, Christian, church, faith, God, holy, Jesus, prayer, saints, scripture and worship. This particular religious dictionary not only encompasses the invocation of faith, but also religious language that would be associated it with, covering what we believe is a broader range of religious rhetoric. We expect to find that President Bush used more religious rhetoric at the onset of the crisis in Iraq as a way to help justify the U.S. invasion. We argue that with the invasion of Afghanistan, Bush did not need to embellish his motives, or use religious rhetoric, since it was clearer that Al-Qaida was behind the 9/11 attacks.

Liberation. Diction 6.0 describes the language of liberation as "motivated by personality factors (eccentric, impetuous, flighty), and political forces (suffrage, liberty, freedom, emancipation)," which is our focus. In examining prior scholarship on the rhetoric of President Bush, particularly in the aftermath of September 11th and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it is evident that distinct characteristics of the president's language were arguably liberation-oriented. Writing about the Bush presidency, Pfiffner (2004) notes that President Bush felt it was his administration's duty to help liberate the world from terrorism. Thus, we expect that the president will use more liberation-oriented language at the onset of the invasion of Iraq than in the beginning phases of Afghanistan.

Results

Table 1 provides the overall means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for each construct for the dataset as a whole. Though no real inferences can be made from this table alone, it is somewhat surprising to see that the mean value on the embellishment and religion constructs are strikingly lower than the other four constructs. This suggests that, overall, the president actively chose not to use language that was exaggerated or that embellished some accomplishment. It also suggests that, on the whole, the president chose to use less religious rhetoric than we might suspect.

To test whether President Bush's rhetoric was different during the onset of both the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, we ran a series of difference in means tests where we compared the twelve speeches in the aforementioned time period in Afghanistan versus the dataset as a whole, and also versus the Iraq speeches; likewise, we make the same comparisons for the Iraq grouping. Table 2 provides the mean values on each construct, broken down by crisis. Table 3 provides the p-values on each comparison.

Immediately, it is evident that rhetoric used during the start of the Iraq war to the fall of Baghdad is markedly different from the rhetoric used at other points in time. In fact, both the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts demonstrate noticeably different results when compared to the sample as a whole. This partially confirms our first hypothesis, as President Bush's language is different at the onset of crisis, and also varies depending on the crisis.

Table 1: Intercorrelations across Constructs

Variables		1	2	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Inspiration	8.21	4.41						
2.	Hardship	7.38	4.92	-.01					
3.	Aggression	7.20	4.92	.16**	.60**				
4.	Embellishment	1.19	2.93	-.02	-.05	-.08+			
5.	Religion	1.45	2.66	.12*	.13*	.07	.05		
6.	Liberation	3.87	3.44	.28**	.06	.09+	.04	.15**	

Note: N=280, **p<.01,*p≤.05,+p≤.20

Table 2: Mean on Constructs by Crisis

	Afghanistan	Iraq	Whole Sample
Inspiration	8.40 (1.25)	6.55 (1.14)	8.21 (.26)
Hardship	9.83 (1.08)	7.64 (1.46)	7.38 (0.29)
Aggression	8.81 (0.87)	13.15 (3.60)	7.20 (0.29)
Embellishment	0.59 (0.06)	3.87 (3.29)	1.19 (0.18)
Liberation	1.95 (0.57)	4.26 (1.03)	3.87 (0.21)
Religion	2.26 (0.43)	3.51 (2.20)	1.45 (0.16)

Table 3: P-value on Difference in Means Tests on Constructs across Conditions

	Afghanistan v. Iraq	Afghanistan v. Whole Sample	Iraq v. Whole Sample
Inspiration	0.36	0.88	0.35
Hardship	0.25	0.08	0.89
Aggression	0.14	0.24	0.00
Embellishment	0.16	0.46	0.02
Liberation	0.05	0.05	0.78
Religion	0.46	0.28	0.06

With the first construct, inspiration, we notice that the president chose to use a large degree of inspirational rhetoric during the start of the campaign in Afghanistan (mean=8.40), but the differences compared to both Iraq and the full sample are not statistically significant. Notwithstanding that, it is still informative in that the president was trying to inspire the nation. Compared to his language used at the beginning of the Iraq crisis (mean=6.55), we see that the president's language shifted. However, there is no noticeable or sizeable difference between the president's inspirational rhetoric compared to his first-term on the whole

(mean=8.21). This confirms our initial hypothesis that the president would use more inspirational language at the start of the campaign in Afghanistan.

Looking at the rhetoric used at the onset of the war in Afghanistan, we notice that President Bush utilized much more hardship-oriented rhetoric compared to the other constructs we test (mean=9.83). This demonstrates that at the outset of the war in Afghanistan, the president emphasized the hardship the American people would face in order to accomplish his goals. In fact, the president used a much higher degree of

hardship language even when comparing to the onset of the war in Iraq (mean=7.64). Comparing the hardship rhetoric he used during the beginning stages of the Afghanistan war to the language used during his first term on the whole, it is evident that the president chose to employ a distinctly different style of rhetoric when discussing Afghanistan, and the differences between the two are statistically significant (p<0.10). Thus, our hypothesis that the president would use more hardship rhetoric during the start of the Iraq war cannot be confirmed. The president, to our surprise, used more hardship language during the beginning phases of the Afghanistan crisis.

Interestingly, President Bush chose to employ a high degree of aggressive rhetoric during the Iraq war (mean=13.15) compared to the rest of his first term (mean=7.20), and the differences between the two are statistically significant (p<.01). Even when comparing this aggressive style to the language used at the start of the war in Afghanistan, we notice a difference that is suggestive (p<.15). This demonstrates that by the time the president was ready to send troops into Iraq, he was also ready to utilize more aggressive rhetoric. This conflicts with our original hypothesis, which states that the president would use more aggressive language at the start of the crisis in Afghanistan. While our prediction was inaccurate, it is interesting to notice the wholesale change in rhetorical style President Bush chose to use. By the time the administration was ready to take on Iraq, the president was using much more aggressive language.

Also interesting to note, we find that President Bush used embellishing rhetoric to a high degree during the initial stages of the Iraq war (mean=3.87). Compared to the sample as a whole (mean=1.19), the differences are statistically significant (p<0.05), which suggests a distinct change in language. Likewise, in comparing the differences between the language used in Iraq (mean=0.59) to the rhetoric used during the beginning phases of the Afghanistan crisis, we also observe a suggestive difference (p<.15). This finding confirms our hypothesis that the president would use more embellishing rhetoric at the start of the campaign in Iraq. The sizeable difference in rhetoric used in the Iraq war is quite telling, and highlights the notion that President Bush opted to use embellishment to accomplish his political goals.

Turning now to our religious construct, we find that the president used a high degree of religious rhetoric at the start of the war in Iraq (mean=3.51) compared to the full sample (mean=1.45), and the differences are significant (p<.10). This suggests that President Bush employed religious rhetoric to achieve his goal of ridding the Iraqi people of Saddam Hussein, and making sure that Iraq did not have a WMD. Comparing the religious language used at the start of the Iraq crisis to the Afghanistan war (mean=2.26), we notice no statistically significant differences in language style, but it is evident that more religious rhetoric was used heading into Iraq than at any other point in the president's first term. This confirms our initial hypothesis that the president would use more religious rhetoric during the start of the campaign in Iraq.

Finally, turning to the liberation construct, we notice that during the start of the Iraq war, liberation rhetoric was amped up to a considerable degree (mean=4.26), compared to the beginning phases of the Afghanistan conflict (mean=1.95), and the differences are statistically significant (p<.05). Interestingly, comparing the liberation-oriented rhetoric at the start of the Iraq war to the full sample (mean=3.87) yields no significant differences. This demonstrates a noticeable shift in language style in both Iraq and the sample as a whole compared to the language used in Afghanistan (mean=1.95). Importantly, there is a statistically significant difference in liberation rhetoric used at the start of Afghanistan compared to the full sample (p<.05). These findings run in line with our original hypothesis, which posits that the president would use more liberation rhetoric in Iraq. Our findings add credence to that notion, and demonstrate that President Bush emphasized liberation at the start of the Iraq conflict more so than in Afghanistan.

Discussion

The findings presented make an important contribution to the field of presidential rhetoric. Scholars note that presidents employ strong and divisive rhetoric in times of crisis; here, we uniquely demonstrate that President Bush used distinct styles of persuasive communication at various points of crises, as evidence by his shifting rhetoric at the start of the Iraq war and fall of Baghdad. Importantly, we learn that Bush used a large degree of inspirational and hardship-orientated language at the start of the Afghanistan crisis. We also find that the president used distinctly different

persuasive appeals during the Iraq war, employing more aggressive language to meet his political goals.

In addition, though his first term as president emphasized less embellishing and religious language on the whole, President Bush's crisis rhetoric was significantly different. For example, we find that Bush employed more religious language in Iraq, which is in line with the extant scholarship that suggests that presidents use religious rhetoric to garner support (Domke and Coe, 2008). In terms of embellishing language, we find empirical evidence to demonstrate that President Bush used embellishment to garner support for the

invasion of Iraq, which supports qualitative research to date (Jamieson, 2007; Kellner, 2007; Lehman, 2004).

Overall, our findings demonstrate that presidents use persuasive language in times of crisis intentionally and strategically. In this case study, we provide empirical evidence that President Bush worked to further his political goals by using inspirational rhetoric, embellishing terms, religious appeals, and liberating language. Going forward, our research provides a foundation for future scholars to build on when examining presidential rhetoric and the language used during crises.

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