

1-1-2010

# Commencing the Rationale for War: George W. Bush's Address at West Point, June 1, 2002

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, [steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu](mailto:steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu)

## **Commencing the Rationale for War: George W. Bush's Address at West Point, June 1, 2002**

Steven R. Goldzwig\*

On a gray day in June of 2002, President Bush delivered a pivotal commencement address at the U.S. Military Academy. The president employed this occasion to announce a new preemptive doctrine that would guide U.S. foreign policy and ultimately serve as a rationale for the Iraq War. In choosing to deliver a commencement address at one of the nation's most venerable military academies, Bush found a perfect match for the rhetorical situation he faced and for the rhetorical situation he was trying to shape. The epideictic occasion was perfectly suited to Bush's epideictic goals, which were central in establishing a moral framework for his new foreign policy doctrine. There was an eloquence to the speech and a high-mindedness that had the potential to serve the president and the nation well.

In the end, however, I maintain that this same epideictic discourse was neither enough to sustain a cogent and compelling rationale for war with Iraq nor, in the final analysis, able to confront or overcome some compelling factual evidence that would drain support for the president's monumental efforts. To advance this argument, I will (1) provide a rhetorical and political context for the speech that will aid in the interpretation and analysis of the address; (2) discuss the nature of epideictic address and appropriate a unique reading of epideictic theory to its particularized enactment in the West Point commencement address; (3) interpret and account for the rhetorical themes and strategies contained within the address; and finally, (4) try to highlight some of the significant rhetorical and political implications of presidential epideictic address under the particularized circumstances of the post-9/11 era and an ongoing but increasingly unpopular war.

### **Approaching West Point: A Rhetorical and Political Context**

Just three months after the September 11, 2001, (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States, it was clear that the president was in the process of reorienting and retooling his entire military and foreign policy to conform with a changed global environment. In remarks at the Citadel on December 11, 2001, we glimpse the evolving rationale for a new doctrine of preemption. Bush argued that the new terrorist threat posed a significant challenge to the United States and the changed circumstances demanded nothing less than major reforms "essential to victory in our war against terror." Indeed, for Bush, 9/11 shattered the national "illusion of immunity," as a "far away evil" became a present danger. September 11 had refocused the mission of U.S. foreign policy. As Bush described it, "a great cause became clear: We will fight terror, and those who sponsor it, to save our children from a future of fear." The

---

\* Steven R. Goldzwig is Professor of Interpersonal, Organizational and Public Communication in the J. William and Mary Diederich College of Communication at Marquette University. A rhetorical theorist and critic interested in the U.S. presidency, Goldzwig's latest book, *Truman's Whistle Stop Campaign*, was published by Texas A&M University Press in 2008. Goldzwig currently serves on the editorial board of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. He is the recipient of Marquette University's Way-Klingler Faculty Fellowship in the Humanities, which has advanced his most recent scholarship on the contemporary presidency and civil rights.

stakes could not have been any higher: “The great threat to civilization is that a few evil men will multiply their murders and gain the means to kill on a scale equal to their hatred. We know they have this mad intent, and we’re determined to stop them. Our lives, our way of life, and our every hope for the world depend on a single commitment: The authors of mass murder must be defeated and never allowed to gain or use the weapons of mass destruction.”

Not only would the United States have to track down the terrorists, monitor their communications, seek to impede their funding, and, finally, uncover their “silent” cells and eliminate them, the president informed the nation that he was about to embark on an even more important task:

Above all, we’re acting to end the state sponsorship of terror. Rogue states are clearly the most likely sources of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons for terrorists. Every nation knows that we cannot accept—and we will not accept—states that harbor, finance, train, or equip the agents of terror. Those nations that violate this principle will be regarded as hostile regimes. They have been warned. They are being watched, and they will be held to account.

Bush pledged to “give our men and women in uniform every resource, every weapon, every tool they need to win the long battle that lies ahead.” Engaging in this battle required multiple strategic, diplomatic, and military reforms, including, among other activities, stepped-up efforts at nuclear nonproliferation, increasing U.S. biodefenses, improving missile defenses, and retooling our intelligence apparatus.<sup>1</sup> According to William Kristol, “On December 11, the president . . . ushered the United States into a new era. In this new era, containment and deterrence will be supplemented by defense, regime change, and pre-emption, in order to deal with the overwhelming threat now facing us—terrorist-sponsoring regimes seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>2</sup>

As the notion of preemption began to take shape, it was posited as a new doctrine to help America win the war on terror, rid the world of dictators, and prevent rogue states from supporting terrorist activities. The president soon fixed his most rapt attention on “regime change” in Iraq. Influential political leaders at the time resurrected the Munich analogy to reinforce the view that the “gamble” was worth taking. As Richard Perle noted, “A preemptive strike against Hitler at the time of Munich would have meant an immediate war, as opposed to one that came later. Later was much worse.” Indeed, in Washington in 2002, the prevailing view was “that forcing ‘regime change’ on Iraq was our era’s grim historical necessity: starting a war would be bad, but waiting to have war brought to us would be worse.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “Remarks at the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, December 11, 2001,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, December 17, 2001, Volume 37, Number 50, pp. 1775-1779. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2001\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd17de01\\_txt-8.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2001_presidential_documents&docid=pd17de01_txt-8.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> William Kristol, “Memorandum to Opinion Leaders on Iraq,” December 6, 2001. Available online at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/defense-20011212.htm>. Accessed May 12, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2006), quotations, pp. 3 and 2.

Not surprisingly, the rhetorical drumbeat for war quickened in 2002. President Bush's January 29 State of the Union address was a rather telling example as the president warned against threatening shadows cast by North Korea, Iran, and Iraq, an "axis of evil" that threatened world peace: "By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic." The need for swift action was framed rhetorically as in the immediate interest of nation; inaction in the face of such grave circumstances was made to seem foolhardy.

Evoking memories of 9/11 and the heroism and virtues summoned by that particular tragedy, Bush appealed to a set of transcendent values as a baseline for encouraging concerted and vigilant efforts against terrorism: "In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass." In drawing a rhetorical vision of a "new culture of responsibility," Bush invited Americans to not only identify with his values, but to take up his cause. And while Bush's 2002 State of the Union pleas may have been based on presumed shared values, the president's prerogatives in this matter were uniquely and individually defined—posited as largely derivative of his office as Commander-in-Chief. "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer." Bush, adopting a familiar presidential persona, spoke as the super-representative of the nation: "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."<sup>4</sup>

This early invitation is but one of a number of rhetorical occasions in the first half of 2002 in which Bush sought to fortify and extend an emerging rationale for preemptive action. The president's bellicose stand was increasingly viewed as univocal and unilateral; his implied solution to the present danger seemed to be pointing in one direction—swift action in the form of war. In these early rhetorical efforts, Bush provided little hint of preserving the old cold war doctrine of containment and the presumed need for international cooperation. At best, international help was destined to be redefined as a "coalition of the willing" rather than importuning a wide number of nations as allies in the cause.

While Bush's rhetorical posturing was important to understanding the evolving context for the June 11 address, the speech must also be viewed against some rather significant political developments. In the three months preceding the address, a number of people argued that the administration's focus on the "axis of evil," which targeted rogue regimes, had displaced its attention from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The administration's perceived aloofness was viewed as a gaffe that had precipitated a negative drift resulting in worsening relations in the Mideast and emboldened terrorist activities.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 29, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, February 4, 2002, Volume 38, Number 5, pp. 133-139. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd04fe02\\_txt-11.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd04fe02_txt-11.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

In late March 2002, Israel suffered a series of terrorist attacks that provoked promised retaliation. On March 27, a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowded hotel dining room in Netanya, Israel, just as more than 200 people gathered for Passover holiday meal, killing at least 19 and wounding more than 100 others. Hamas took responsibility and Israel vowed a "swift response." An Israeli government spokesman called the incident a "Passover massacre." Authorities suggested that the peace mission of General Anthony C. Zinni, American mediator, had been severely undermined. President Bush called for an end to such "callous" terrorist acts; the Palestinian Authority condemned the attack, saying it was intended to undermine the Zinni mission and the Arab summit meeting, where Saudi Arabia's peace plan was being discussed. Hamas officials rejected that plan.<sup>5</sup>

After two subsequent terrorist attacks, the Israeli government declared Yasir Arafat an "enemy" and sent in tanks and armored personnel carriers in an effort to isolate him in his Ramallah headquarters while simultaneously launching an "extended operation" in the Palestinian territories meant to root out the terrorist threat. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon indicated he was calling up 20,000 reserve soldiers to free regular forces for an operation that could last a long time. Arafat's compound was subsequently ringed by tanks and armored personnel carriers and bulldozers breached a hole in the wall around the compound. Gun battles broke out between Israeli troops and Arafat's guards. Nabil Aburdeineh, senior aide to Arafat, called on the United States to call off the Israelis and to isolate Sharon and his government.<sup>6</sup>

Bush's influence over events in the West Bank seemed tenuous at best. At a minimum, the terrorist activities slowed down the peace process. Moreover, the unfolding events complicated the coherence of the emerging preemption doctrine. To maintain consistency, the president would not only have to ask Arafat to put an end to the suicide attacks, but also have to direct "swift action" against him. Since Bush was in need of Middle Eastern allies in the run-up to an increasingly likely war with Iraq, he could ill-afford to alienate more nations in the Arab world and remained reticent to take this additional step.

On March 29, the United States approved U.N. Security Council Resolution 1402 calling for a cease-fire in the region. On March 30, the president went before the press corps and announced that he had called several world leaders expressing his concern over the escalating violence in the Middle East. Walking a fine line, Bush lamented that Arafat "could do a lot more to prevent attacks" and cautioned that the Israeli government needed "to keep in mind the need that there's got to be a peaceful solution at some point." Bush also indicated that he had directed General Zinni to stay in the region in an effort to keep peace efforts alive.<sup>7</sup>

On April 1, the president was asked directly whether or not the Bush doctrine on terrorism applied to Mr. Arafat and why he refrained from labeling Arafat a "terrorist." Bush

---

<sup>5</sup> Joel Brinkley, "Mideast Turmoil: Bomb Kills at least 19 in Israel as Arabs Meet over Peace Plan," *The New York Times*, March, 28, 2002, A1.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Brinkley and Serge Schmemmann, "Mideast Turmoil: The Fighting; Sharon Calls Arafat an Enemy and Sends Tanks to Isolate Him at Headquarters in Ramallah," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2002, A1.

<sup>7</sup> "Remarks on the Situation in the Middle East and an Exchange with Reporters in Crawford, Texas, March 30, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday April 8, 2002, Volume 38, Number 14, pp. 541-542. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi/bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd08ap02\\_txt-4.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi/bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd08ap02_txt-4.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2002.

replied: "I'd like to see Chairman Arafat denounce the terrorist activities that are taking place, the constant attacks." Another reporter, trying to get a coherent answer, asked pointedly: "What's keeping you from labeling Chairman Arafat a terrorist?" Bush's retorted meekly that Arafat "agreed to a peace process," but this did not adequately answer the question, which pressed the president's seeming doctrinal inconsistency.<sup>8</sup>

With his feckless policy in seeming disarray, politicians and pundits alike speculated that the president would up the ante—more so than at any time since 9/11—by initiating a more robust involvement in the peace process in the Middle East. This was confirmed April 4 when the president announced that he was sending Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Middle East. He called upon Arafat to help control terrorist activities and asked the Israelis to act in concert with the U.S.-sponsored plans, which called for a halt to settlement activities and withdrawal from the occupied territories. Bush proclaimed: "The world expects an immediate cease-fire, immediate resumption of security cooperation with Israel against terrorism. An immediate order to crack down on terrorist networks. I expect better leadership, and I expect results."<sup>9</sup> The irony of President Bush demanding better leadership in efforts to reduce violence in the Middle East did not escape his more vociferous international detractors who firmly believed Bush's foreign policy had actually created the climate that led to the latest imbroglio.

Powell was given a tall order, including, among other items, securing the implementation of U.N. resolution 1402 fostering an end to the terror and violence, ensuring withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian cities, including Ramallah, and implementing the U.S.-sponsored plans for peace. In his April 6 radio address, Bush indicated that "this could be a hopeful moment in the Middle East." His tentativeness was marked by both a desire for future peace and the tempered realism of the present intransigent situation: "I believe the region could write a new story of democracy and development and trade and join the progress of our times. Yet, progress requires an atmosphere of peace, and peace requires acts of leadership, not acts of terror."<sup>10</sup> On April 8, Bush reiterated his demand that Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon direct Israeli forces to withdraw from the West Bank territories "without delay."<sup>11</sup> When Secretary Powell returned from his peace mission in Israel, the Israelis had not fully withdrawn from the West Bank towns and villages. Press accounts at the time noted the high likelihood of the failure of Powell's mission and spoke ominously of a region of growing "turmoil" that was now "out of control." Press accounts at the time portrayed the ongoing

<sup>8</sup> "Remarks following a Meeting with Governor George E. Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg and an Exchange with Reporters, April 1, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday April 8, 2002, Volume 38, Number 14, pp. 545-546. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd08ap02\\_txt-7.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd08ap02_txt-7.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Press Release. "President to Send Secretary Powell to Middle East." Office of the Press Secretary, April 4, 2002. Available online at [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20020404-1.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20020404-1.html). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> "The President's Radio Address, April 6, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday April 15, 2002, Volume 38, Number 15, p. 577. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd15ap02\\_txt-4.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd15ap02_txt-4.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> "Remarks to Reporters Following a Tour of the Citizens Police Academy in Knoxville, April 8, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday April 15, 2002, Volume 38, Number 15, p. 582. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd15ap02\\_txt-6.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd15ap02_txt-6.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

conflict in the Middle East as taking a sizable “toll” on the Bush administration’s erratic and effete foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

On April 18, Powell tried to put a positive spin on his accomplishments: “We made clear to the leaders in the region that we want to move forward with negotiations as soon as possible, and we’re looking at different ways to do that once security has been established.” But when the president was pressed as to exactly what kind of progress had been achieved by his Secretary of State, he replied that “going to the region and convincing the parties that we’ll never get to peace if there’s violence” was itself a strong step. Bush said that laying out a “vision of hope” was “important,” as was “convinc[ing] others that these terrorist acts will forever and constantly undermine the capacity for peace.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the diplomacy the violence refused to abate.

Along with increased diplomatic efforts in the Mideast, Bush traveled to Russia and Europe in the latter part of May 2002 in an attempt to underline and enhance bilateral relations with Russia, Germany, France, and Italy. Moreover, the president sought to strengthen the NATO alliance as a bulwark against global terrorism. This trip, an effort to shore up frayed relations and marshal cooperation and support for the war on terror, also presaged a plea for assistance in what increasingly looked like an upcoming U.S.-led war against Iraq.

Bush attempted to reassure the European allies regarding Russia. No longer portraying Russia as an “evil empire,” and intent upon defining a new post-cold war era where cooperation would replace competition in U.S.-Russian relations, the president remarked:

The United States and Russia are ridding ourselves of the last vestiges of cold war confrontation. . . . President Putin and I are about to sign the most dramatic nuclear arms reduction in history. Both the United States and Russia will reduce our nuclear arsenals by about two-thirds, to the lowest level in decades. Old arms agreements sought to manage hostility and maintain a balance of terror. This new agreement recognizes that Russia and the West are no longer enemies.<sup>14</sup>

This depiction of a changed set of circumstances also would play well later on when Bush invited Putin to be a partner in the war on terror. Bush also argued that NATO played a vital role in helping win the global war on terror: “There can be no lasting security in a world at the

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Todd S. Purdum, “Mideast Turmoil: Diplomacy; Powell Begins a Crucial Trip to the Mideast,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2002, A1; R. W. Apple, Jr., “Guns of April: Mideast out of Control; When Savage Passions Set a Trap for the World,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2002, Section 4, p. 1; Todd S. Purdum and James Bennett, “Mideast Turmoil: Diplomacy; No Cease-Fire until Withdrawal,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2002, A1; Patrick E. Tyler, “Mideast Turmoil: Taking Stock; A Rising Toll for Bush: No Peace, More Blame,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2002, A10.

<sup>13</sup> “Remarks Prior to a Meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell and an Exchange with Reporters, April 18, 2002,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday April 22, 2002, Volume 38, Number 16, pp. 651-652. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd22ap02\\_txt-17.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd22ap02_txt-17.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> “Remarks to a Special Session of the German Bundestag, May 23, 2002,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, May 27, 2002, Volume 38, Number 21, p. 883. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd27my02\\_txt-21.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd27my02_txt-21.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

mercy of terrorists – for my nation or any nation. Given this threat, NATO’s defining purpose, our collective defense, is as urgent as ever. America and Europe need each other to fight and win the war against global terror.”<sup>15</sup>

In a news conference preceding his trip abroad, Bush tried to join “common values” and “common cause” as a centerpiece for improving relationships and fostering joint initiatives with Russia and Europe. Although his phrasing certainly left something to be desired, the president’s intent could still be gleaned from a rather ironic misstatement: “I mean, listen, fighting for terror is a common cause that is a powerful force that unites us.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to touting his diplomatic success in arms reduction negotiations with the Russians, Bush pledged that Russia also would be a staunch partner in the “war on terror”: “We’ve also signed a joint declaration of new strategic relationship that charts a course toward greater security, political and economic cooperation between Russia and the United States. Our nations will continue to cooperate closely in the war against global terror.” The president also commented on upcoming discussions in Rome on a new NATO-Russia Council, declaring confidently, “For decades, Russia and NATO were adversaries. Those days are gone and that’s good.” Other pledges were made to work together on regional challenges and economic cooperation.<sup>17</sup> Delivering the good news of cooperation with a long-time adversary was also targeted persuasively as a sign that the United States could work productively with its European allies, as well.

In sum, as the June 1 address at West Point approached, the president was making a case for war as well as a case for peace. In his view, the two were inextricably linked. While Saddam Hussein had become a primary U.S. target in the war on terror, Bush had hoped to demonstrate that he could gain the cooperation of his European and Russian allies. The clear implication was that friends could demonstrate compliance by sharing U.S. values and goals and “enemies” simply comprised all those who veered off in a direction different from or even hostile to the president’s desires.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “Interview with European Journalists, May 21, 2002,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, May 27, 2002, Volume 38, Number 21, p. 867. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd27my02\\_txt-17.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd27my02_txt-17.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> “The President’s News Conference with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in Moscow, May 24, 2002,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, May 27, 2002, Volume 38, Number 21, p. 887. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd27my02\\_txt-26.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd27my02_txt-26.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> For detailed and devastating account of the larger context of the run-up to the Iraq war and the rhetoric of deception see Stephen John Hartnett and Laura Ann Stengrim, *Globalization and Empire: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, Free Markets, and the Twilight of Democracy* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), esp. pp. 40-138. Another useful study outlining the extent of the Bush administration’s deceptive rhetorical practices can be found in Douglas Kellner, “Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric and the War on Terror,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37 (2007): 622-45; and finally, see e.g., Henry A. Giroux, “The Politics of Lying: The Assault on Meaning in Bush’s America,” *Tikkun* (March-April, 2006): 36-37; 65-66.



## A Particular Reading of Epideictic Theory

In rhetorically framing the June 1, 2002, commencement address, we are reminded that elements of remembrance, legitimation, and celebration attend most epideictic occasions. The rhetorical performance enacted in an epideictic form such as an inaugural address, eulogy, or commencement address is anything but an empty gesture because it formally enacts “a discourse of power,” which “guide[s] and constrain[s] consciousness” and provides “sources of legitimation.”<sup>19</sup> Christine Oravec notes that epideictic address can be pivotal in that “[t]he praiseworthy object, if represented with accuracy, may become a *standard* for action [emphasis added].”<sup>20</sup> In epideictic, then, we encounter a rather formidable form that lends a president powerful persuasive influence.

In employing epideictic address, the president often serves as Educator-in-Chief; among his principal duties is to impart requisite values.<sup>21</sup> The president’s epideictic performance is apt to be perceived by audiences as a ritual enactment of presidential duty. The presumption is that the president will remain true to form and execute his responsibilities with the care and devotion called for by the rhetorical situation. The mere act of performance, in this instance, legitimates the president and the presidency as an active force in shaping symbolically national attitudes. Ideally, epideictic performances help presidents reinforce the authority conferred by the office to help solidify the larger institutional legitimacy necessary for effective governance. The president’s ability to shape the national consciousness is a direct result of audience’s complicity with his perceived role. In acknowledging the role the president plays here, there is also an implicit acknowledgment of presidential power. For example, as Commander-in-Chief, the president’s authority to craft and impart a message praising the nation’s fallen heroes goes largely unquestioned. The president’s particular enactment not only carves out a particular occasion but endows it with a moral presence—a presence that over time can constitute an evolving but generally implied stable moral universe.

Interestingly, Beale argues that epideictic discourse “does not merely say, argue, or allege something about the world of social action” but “constitutes (in some special way defined by the conventions or customs of the community) a significant social action in itself.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, epideictic address is perhaps best judged on whether or not the speech performs an appropriate or valuable social function rather than on the truth value of its claims. In essence, the epideictic form has often been viewed as one that *creates* social truths rather than merely

<sup>19</sup> Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Ronald Reagan’s Enactment of the Presidency in his 1981 Inaugural Address,” in *Forms, Genre, and the Study of Political Discourse*, edited by Herbert W. Simons and Aram A. Aghazarian (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 226-245; quotations, 226 and 243.

<sup>20</sup> Christine Oravec, “‘Observation’ in Aristotle’s Theory of Epideictic,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9 (1976): 171.

<sup>21</sup> As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observe: “In epideictic oratory, the speaker turns educator. . . . He is, so to speak, the educator of his audience, and if it is necessary that he should enjoy a certain prestige before he speaks, it is to enable him, through his own authority, to promote the values that he is upholding. . . . Epideictic speeches [are] appeals to common values, undisputed though not formulated, made by one who is qualified to do so, with the consequent strengthening of adherence to those values with a view to later action. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 51-53.

<sup>22</sup> Walter H. Beale, “Rhetorical Performance Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (1978): 221-246; quotation, 225.

reporting on them. Epideictic rhetoric, then, enacts present values that are presumed to be goods in themselves, requiring little justification. Traditionally, then, proof is not usually associated with epideictic public address. In the main, epideictic discourse has been characterized by its penchant for display, i.e., its performance as demonstration rather than reliance upon probative evidence. For a president, epideictic rhetoric is often critical in preparing the ground for deliberative action. The values adumbrated are crucial to public predispositions that can help sanction future policy.

I suggest that a commencement address as an epideictic form, delivered at one of the nation's most venerable military academies, provides an almost perfect place and occasion for a presidential attempt to legitimate authority and appeal to a common, sacrosanct political-cultural script of power and permanence in sustaining American cultural and political memory. Commencement addresses shape public memory and ground our attitudes about the future, including public policy. Presidential commencement addresses delivered at our great educational institutions whose mission is to instruct and train the military seem to deserve special attention because they are rhetorical artifacts that can be useful in an interpretation that speaks to epideictic rhetoric's role in the evocation and maintenance of power and authority, and in negotiating legitimation processes that can authorize attitudes and predispositions toward war. In fact, decisions to go to war and declarations of war themselves have always relied on some measure of epideictic public address.

One particularly instructive lens for interpreting the nature and function of epideictic in this instance can be derived from Michael Madden's research on Ronald Reagan's funeral addresses commemorating the Vietnam War. Madden argues that presidential funeral orations, as forms of epideictic address, (1) legitimate political authority and national sacrifice; (2) influence popular reception of cultural history; (3) mobilize popular loyalties and nationalist sentiments; and finally, (4) tend to manipulate, coerce, and deceive the American public.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, the sum total of these influences is to "*subvert the public's capacity for effective dissent.*" In brief, "epideictic address is a suitable vehicle for containing public resistance to the violence and brutality of war."<sup>24</sup> In Reagan's case in particular, Madden encountered a leader who "while ostensibly highlighting the martial valor of Vietnam veterans [through] the presidential funeral address operates largely to recover a sense of public faith in the American tradition of just war."<sup>25</sup> As Madden makes clear, commemorative addresses memorializing the war dead and their sacrifice may also be occasions for legitimizing the state and inducing "sentiments supporting future armed conflict."<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, to wrap oneself up in the power and paraphernalia of a modern nation-state as represented in and by the most powerful military apparatus in the world is to summon

<sup>23</sup> Michael Patrick Madden, "A Covenant with Death: The President's Epideictic Message of Legitimation and National Sacrifice," Dissertation. University of Iowa, 1988. Thesis Supervisor: Michael Calvin McGee. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1990, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Madden, "A Covenant with Death," 5 and 2. For a useful and compelling essay on highlighting how Bush forces amassed a rhetorical barrage that militated against effective dissent, see Stephen John Hartnett and Jennifer Rose Mercieca, " 'A Discovered Dissembler Can Achieve Nothing Great': Or, Four Theses on the Death of Presidential Rhetoric in an Age of Empire," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 37/4 (2007): 599-621.

<sup>25</sup> Madden, "A Covenant with Death," 3.

<sup>26</sup> Madden, "A Covenant with Death," 4.

a silent juggernaut of credibility as a backdrop for one's words and a veritable fortress as an explanation for one's proposed deeds. This is not to say that such enactments are risk free. Banners emblazoned with "Mission Accomplished" can create haunting images indeed if perceptions change and the mission seems to have unraveled. But in the moment of enactment, there is potent force displayed and the epideictic form leaves very little opportunity for dissent.

Madden, relying on John Lucaites's articulations of the substantive and regulative functions of ideographs as keys to presidential epideictic address, explains that presidents display *substantive* ideological commitments when articulating what are widely viewed as the proper charges of government—securing "safety" and "happiness." Not surprisingly, these two ideological commitments may conflict with one another and create tensions. When a president calls for "national sacrifice," he often is interested in preserving national security over individual liberties, which presumably lead to "happiness." What helps to regulate the choice for national sacrifice *over* happiness are the *regulative* functions associated with the nature of a just war and our commitment to the rule of law. Terms such as "duty," "honor," and "country" are "lower order" ideographs that help to structure audience predispositions toward assent to the need for national sacrifice. As Madden makes clear:

Such ideographs are not to be considered a rhetoric of war, but rather constitute a rhetoric of moral righteousness used to justify war. They serve to legitimate the state's authority to call for national sacrifice by positioning the experiences of war within a tradition of uncritical "faith" in the American credo of war. In short, such a rhetoric embedded within the epideictic vehicle is culturally deterministic, at once concealing the "doubt" incurred in war and perpetuating an illusion of America's "just wars" for Liberty and its pledges to God.<sup>27</sup>

It is not surprising that when calling for national sacrifice, presidents would privilege ideographs such as "safety" over individual "happiness." What is interesting, however, is the extent to which George W. Bush has relied on this tactic. President Bush has employed epideictic address extensively post-9/11 and throughout the duration of the Iraq war.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Madden, "A Covenant with Death," 94-95. For Lucaites original work in this area, see John L. Lucaites, *Flexibility and Consistency in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Anglo-Whigism: A Case Study in the Rhetorical Dimensions of Legitimacy* (Unpub. Ph.D. diss.: University of Iowa, 1984), 52. Lucaites argues that ideographs function *substantively* as arguments for the intrinsic value of a particular culture. Ideographs function *regulatively* when there is an attempt to balance "sets" of substantive ideographs in potential conflict with each other. For more recent discussions of the role and function of ideographs, see e.g., Celeste Michele Condit and John L. Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Mary E. Stuckey and Joshua R. Ritter, "George Bush, <Human Rights>, and American Democracy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37 (2007): 646-66; esp. 648-50.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 607-632; Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (Nov. 2003): 293-319; Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush, Epideictic Advocacy, and the War in Iraq," paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial Public Address Conference, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, October 6, 2006.

Epidictic address lends the president a powerful intentional resource—the power to define.<sup>29</sup> For President Bush, the power to define means that, in John Murphy’s words, “the world is, as it ever was, divided between good and evil. People of character oppose evil. Policy is justified not by expediency arguments, but by metaphysical ends—by character and faith.” Thus, Bush’s epidictic address “creates a kind of hermetically sealed system in which the world is as its, people are as they are, and real Americans act accordingly.” Furthermore, and “equally important,” in Bush’s epidictic rhetoric, “public judgments are rendered through the prism of honor or dishonor.”<sup>30</sup>

Depending on the rhetorical situation at hand, the dialectical relationship between epidictic and deliberative address in various presidential iterations has taken on different relational forms.<sup>31</sup> I argue that regardless of its various manifestations and relationships, epidictic address—as a form of cultural, social, and political influence—gains added intensity and power when it is delivered by a president on an epidictic occasion at a military institution. I will treat President Bush’s commencement address at West Point as a politico-cultural epidictic rhetorical artifact that opens up the inner workings of the nation-state and, in this instance, provides us with a particularly unique opportunity to analyze and apprehend the justificatory rhetorical strategies that prepare a nation for war. At West Point, we encounter President Bush “commencing the rationale for war.” In what follows, then, I analyze and evaluate a unique form of epidictic discourse management—one specifically premised upon the need to justify war through the rhetoric of moral righteousness.

### Bush at West Point

Besides handling the requirements of the occasion, i.e., honoring and congratulating the cadets at their graduation and encouraging their successful future activities as military officers, a close reading of the speech text reveals that President Bush pressed three major rhetorical aims in response to the complex rhetorical context described earlier. First, he sought to recommit the United States and his administration to the fight against global terrorism. Second, he was intent upon employing his speech for developing a rationale and establishing the

<sup>29</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Function of Epidictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 284-299.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy, “Our Mission and Our Moment,” 626.

<sup>31</sup> The flexibility and elasticity of the epidictic form has been well-demonstrated in previous rhetorical studies. For example, Dow has made the case that Ronald Reagan employed both epidictic and deliberative discourse in an effort to address foreign policy crises during his administration. Dow argues that there are two types of crisis rhetoric, those that fulfill the need for communal understanding (i.e., epidictic functions) and those that fulfill the need for policy approval (i.e., deliberative functions). See Bonnie J. Dow, “The Function of Epidictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (1989): 294-310. Murphy has made a strong case that both epidictic and deliberative address can also be used in mounting dissent against armed conflict. Murphy notes, “epidictic rhetoric is concerned with issues of honor and dishonor; all other concerns fade before this key issue” (pp. 67-68). Furthermore, Murphy explains: “While the function of war rhetoric is primarily deliberative—that is, justifying a change in policy from peace to war—epidictic appeals are also used to establish the honor of the decision to go to war” (p. 67). See John M. Murphy, “Epidictic and Deliberative Strategies in Opposition to War: The Paradox of Honor and Expediency,” *Communication Studies* 43 (1992): 65-78.

groundwork for a new foreign policy of preemption—the goal of which was to authorize a war with Iraq as a pivotal step in the prosecution of the war on terror. Third, having recently returned from trips to Europe and Russia, Bush wanted to signal that he was still intent on strengthening relations between the United States and Russia and our European allies, as well as impress upon the world community that he was not only seeking cooperation in his quest for regime change in Iraq, but remained vitally interested in traditional U.S.-sponsored cooperative ventures aimed at advancing human rights, human dignity, and the economic opportunity that he believed often accompanied democratic development. Interestingly, to realize these goals, Bush had to provide justifications for going to war while simultaneously offering measures for continuing the peace. For Bush, this required outlining and justifying a sweeping in change in the direction and substance of long regnant U.S. foreign policy. The graduation speech at West Point provided a perfect opportunity and occasion for such a complex task.<sup>32</sup>

***Epidictic Stirrings.*** In Bush's view, the military plays an indispensable and primary role in the development and execution of the new doctrine of preemption. Indeed, the military is described as necessary to prosecute the doctrine and thus pivotal to winning the war against terrorism. Bush pays due respect to the cadets by associating them with the "Long Gray Line" of warrior officers who have served as their heroic predecessors: "You walk in the tradition of Eisenhower and MacArthur, Patton and Bradley – the commanders who saved a civilization. And you walk in the tradition of second lieutenants who did the same, by fighting and dying on distant battlefields." The president lauds the cadets' "creativity and courage" while linking their future service to a vaunted history and tradition of American sacrifice in warfare:

Every West Point class is commissioned to the Armed Forces. Some West Point classes are also commissioned by history, to take part in a great new calling for their country. Speaking here to the class of 1942—six months after Pearl Harbor—General Marshall said, "We're determined that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle, our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand, and of overwhelming power on the other."

[Bush continues:]

Officers graduating that year helped fulfill that mission, defeating Japan and Germany, and then reconstructing those nations as allies. West Point graduates of the 1940s saw the rise of a deadly new challenge—the challenge of imperial communism—and opposed it from Korea to Berlin, to Vietnam, and in the Cold War, from beginning to end. And as the sun set on their struggle, many of those West Point officers lived to see a world transformed.

Such a narrative provides very little differentiation between World War II and subsequent wars like Korea and Vietnam. The particulars of each of these operations are flattened for the epidictic occasion; each is depicted as resulting in wholly positive outcomes

<sup>32</sup> All excerpts that follow are derived from "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, June 1, 2002," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, June 10, 2002, Volume 38, Number 23, pp. 944-948. Available online at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002\\_presidential\\_documents&docid=pd10jn02\\_txt-5.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_presidential_documents&docid=pd10jn02_txt-5.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2007.

and each is argued to have resulted in a “world transformed.” The particular facts that differentiate these engagements and their differing outcomes are scrupulously avoided. Bush’s historical narrative links this newest cadre of West Point graduates to a similar glorious destiny as they begin the long, arduous task of taking up their mission and their watch under the present Commander-in-Chief: “History has also issued its call to your generation. In your last year, America was attacked by a ruthless and resourceful enemy. You graduate from this Academy in a time of war, taking your place in an American military that is powerful and is honorable.” The West Point code—duty, honor, country—is invoked here and the earlier linkage to others who have served in the vaunted tradition of the “Long Gray Line” gives those present a reason to be proud and a mandate to walk tall. Any deviation in this charge would presumably bring dishonor. At West Point, Bush finds ample occasion to advance touchstone epideictic claims of the American experience.<sup>33</sup>

President Bush provides encouragement for the dangerous tasks ahead by expressing his pride in those who have already served under his command. His entreaty also further establishes and legitimates his credentials as commander-in-chief. The president presents himself as the symbolic super-representative of a grateful nation: “I am proud of the men and women who have fought on my orders. America is profoundly grateful for all who serve the cause of freedom, and for all who have given their lives in its defense. This nation respects and trusts our military, and we are confident in your victories to come.” Bush’s prediction of more “victories to come” certainly implies he is contemplating entering a new war zone. Furthermore, Bush takes the opportunity to provide a rationale for why another war on another front may be necessary:

Wherever we carry it, the American flag will stand not only for our power, but for freedom. Our nation’s cause has always been larger than our nation’s defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors human liberty. We will defend the peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.

This excerpt not only provides a mini-summary of the goals of the president’s address, but also appeals to his immediate audience and their sacred values. Engagement in war is characterized as a sacred quest for “freedom” and an effort to exact a “just peace.” War is posited as necessary in confronting “terrorists and tyrants,” not just to defend U.S. interests, but “free and open societies” everywhere. Furthermore, the cadets are challenged to participate in Bush’s overarching vision: “Building this just peace is America’s opportunity, and America’s duty. From this day forward, it is your challenge, as well, and we will meet this challenge together.” These

---

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most famous instantiation and reminder of the West Point code is memorialized in General Douglas MacArthur’s Thayer Award Acceptance Address “Duty, Honor, Country,” delivered May 12, 1962, at West Point. See Douglas MacArthur, Thayer Award Address Delivered May 12, 1962, West Point, NY. Transcription by Michael E. Eidenmuller. Available online at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/douglasmacarthurthayeraward.html>. Accessed May 12, 2007.

regulative ideographs are critical to the president's appeals. In substantive ideographic terms, "war" equals "peace."<sup>34</sup>

Bush also makes the case for American exceptionalism and righteousness: "You will wear the uniform of a great and unique country. America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves—safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the hope for a better life." In taking up this challenge, the cadets are assured that America's goals are noble and expansive: "safety," "liberty," and simple quest for a "better life." The iconic ideographs rehearsed here are crucial to the epideictic occasion and reinforce the mission Bush articulates. The values adumbrated also prepare the ground for the introduction of a new doctrine of preemption.

**Arguing for Preemption.** The urgency of the new mission for the new graduates is made starkly apparent by a description of the emergence of an unprecedented enemy in unprecedented times. The president defines this new enemy and tells the cadets that the fearsome threat they pose must be thwarted:

The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology—when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends—and we will oppose them with all our power.

The peril described here becomes a key rationale for preemption and this excerpt was later quoted verbatim in the United States National Security Strategy of 2002.<sup>35</sup>

Opposing one's enemies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also requires a change in strategy, one that overturns the cold war doctrine of the past: "New threats also require new thinking. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on

<sup>34</sup> For a substantive book-length analysis of how the rhetorical drumbeat for "war" is argumentatively positioned as the best path to "peace" and how those opposing war are labeled as "traitors" or "unpatriotic," see Robert L. Ivie, *Dissent from War* (Bloomfield, Conn: Kumerian Press, Inc., 2007). For an important and timely essay on the rhetorical processes shaping the impulse for war in a democracy, see Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "Hunting the Devil: Democracy's Rhetorical Impulse to War," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2007): 580-98.

<sup>35</sup> "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002." Available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>. Accessed May 12, 2007. Three significant passages from the West Point Address appear as primers for the NSS document. Section 1 leads with this passage: "Our Nation's cause has always been larger than our Nation's defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors liberty. We will defend the peace against the threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent" (p. 1); Section 2 leads with this banner: "Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities" (p. 3). Finally, Section 5 is highlighted with the excerpt utilized here (see p. 13).

missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.” Having provided the principle rationale for the change in doctrine, the president assures the cadets that the best course of action is to preempt those who would employ weapons of mass destruction or provide them to others: “We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” Thus, despite all U.S. efforts on homeland security and missile defense systems, Bush argues that the only “real safety” lies in preemption: “The war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.” This bellicose statement veers American foreign policy away from traditional forms of negotiation, cooperation, and diplomacy and turns sharply from traditional cold war doctrines of deterrence and containment toward an unprecedented call for unilateral action against a newly defined and nefarious enemy, “terrorists and those who harbor them,” wherever they may be.

The new doctrine is introduced as the key to the safety and security of the United States in the post-9/11 environment. In the following portion of the address, security is privileged over any other competing value or concern and the president puts all of the citizens of the United States on notice that they too must stand the watch for America or risk ruin:

Our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives. All nations that decide for aggression and terror will pay a price. We will not leave the safety of America and the peace of the planet at the mercy of a few mad terrorists and tyrants. We will lift this dark threat from our country and from the world.

The cadets, like all Americans, become part of the rhetorical “we.” This tough talk instills confidence and its certainty leaves little room for negotiation. We do not normally seek diplomacy with “mad terrorists and tyrants” and the removal of a “dark threat” seems less than amenable to another round of mere peace talks. The statement sweeps us all into the path of war.

***The President as Arbiter of Moral Truth.*** The president also legitimates the new preemptive doctrine by reserving his right to serve as arbiter of moral truth in the world. Bush argued that the U.S. had the right and the duty to interpret and act on that truth by pursuing a “firm moral purpose.” The president advanced the policy of U.S. intervention through preemptive action by informing the cadets and the nation at large that America was uniquely equipped to identify evil, confront it, and remove it: “Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.” If this breathtaking language had been employed in a purely context-free, hermetically sealed deliberative setting, its moral and political certitude might have seemed even more shocking, if not arrogantly inappropriate. In the wake of 9/11, however, and as a *rationale* for going to war on an epideictic occasion, this



Manichaean depiction seems like a stroke of bold leadership and an efficient and effective way to go to the heart of a serious and intractable problem. The new doctrine provides a high-order mission in a time of maximum threat and the language used to convey it seems to contribute powerfully to its perceived legitimacy.

***“Defend[ing] the Peace that Makes All Progress Possible.”*** Since the president was having a hard time convincing Russia and our European allies of the wisdom of his Mideast policy, much less joining him in an attempt at regime change in Iraq, he spent a little less than the latter third of the commencement address trying to assuage these parties as well as other members in the international community. The president made it clear that his new doctrine also included a vision of world comity: “Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict in our world is not. More and more, civilized nations find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge—thereby, making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.” Bush argued that common values require common cause: “Today the great powers are also increasingly united by common values, instead of divided by conflicting ideologies. The United States, Japan and our Pacific friends, and now all of Europe, share a deep commitment to human freedom, embodied in strong alliances such as NATO. And the tide of liberty is rising in many other nations.” Indeed, the president was positively ebullient about the rising tide: “Today, from the Middle East to South Asia, we are gathering broad international coalitions to increase the pressure for peace. We must build strong and great power relations when times are good; to help manage crisis when times are bad. America needs partners to preserve the peace, and we will work with every nation that shares this noble goal.”

The president indicated that his efforts at cooperation were aimed at social and economic progress and that his vision for development was based upon timeless principles that would ensure “hope of a better day”: “The 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance. America cannot impose this vision—yet we can support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people.” Moreover, Bush sought to assure the international audience that those states that make “the right choices” will find a trusted ally in the United States: “In our development aid, in our diplomatic efforts, in our international broadcasting, and in our educational assistance, the United States will promote moderation and tolerance and human rights. And we will defend the peace that makes all progress possible.”

Bush casts national aspirations to democracy and freedom as universal and unassailable: “When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world. The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes.” While the words are noble, they give no indication of attempts to differentiate between the varying notions of freedom that may stem from different lands, cultures, and belief systems. In sum, Bush offers an ideological vision of democracy as an emotionally charged “one size fits all” proposition.

In his peroration, Bush reconnects the nobility of the U.S. mission to the role of the West Point graduates, who, as the president explains, not only serve as the first line of defense in freedom's cause in for the nation, but also globally:

The bicentennial class of West Point now enters this drama. With all in the United States Army, you will stand between your fellow citizens and grave danger. You will help establish a peace that allows millions around the world to live in liberty and to grow in prosperity. You will face times of calm, and times of crisis. And every test will find you prepared—because you're the men and women of West Point. You leave here marked by the character of this Academy, carrying with you the highest ideals of our nation.

The only appropriate conclusion in interpreting this narrative is one that acknowledges and accedes to a preemptive doctrine as a moral duty and a global mission.

Finally, Bush praises the West Point cadets by again pointing to their revered motto—Duty-Honor-Country—and summoning these newly-minted officers to uphold the highest ideals of their long tradition: “Today, your last day at West Point, you begin a life of service in a career unlike any other. You’ve answered a calling to hardship and purpose, to risk and honor. . . . May you always bring to that duty the high standards of this great American institution. May you always be worthy of the long gray line that stretches two centuries behind you.” With that final salute, President Bush had just proclaimed a new vision of American foreign policy in the age of global terrorism. In the words of Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, the president had introduced “the most sweeping redesign of U.S. grand strategy since the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Gaddis notes that Cold War planning included developing scenarios for actual “hot wars.” That planning included distinctions between pre-emption and prevention. At that time, “preemption” meant taking military action against a state that was about to launch an attack; international law and practice had long allowed such actions to forestall clear and immediately present dangers. “Prevention” meant starting a war against a state that might, at some future point, pose such risks. In mounting its post-September 11 offensive, the Bush administration conflated these terms, using the word “preemption” to justify what turned out to be a “preventive” war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.” See John Lewis Gaddis, “Grand Strategy in the Second Term.” *Foreign Affairs* 84 (January-February 2005). Available online at <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?id=845825731&sid=4&Fmt=3&clientId=55898&RQT=309&VName=PQD>. This has produced some unnecessary confusion regarding the moral as well as practical differences between “preemptive” and “preventative” war. What the Bush administration has called “preemptive” is actually “preventative” war as understood by Just War theorists. The former refers to situations such as when the missiles have been fired at you and you respond by destroying them or otherwise attacking “the enemy.” Preventative war allows for a prediction of a future danger, as in: “They are developing WMDs that will threaten us down the road.” The slide of U.S. foreign policy toward the latter posture while invoking the former term is both dangerous and confusing because the distinction between these two types of “justified” war has become entirely obscured in public discourse. For an excellent treatment of the preemption doctrine and relevant distinctions and ramifications see William W. Keller and Gordon R. Mitchell, eds., *Hitting First: Preventive Force in U.S. Security Strategy* (Pittsburgh, Pa. : University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

## Rhetorical and Political Implications

At a minimum, the president had announced a controversial new foreign policy with ominous implications. *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller described the West Point commencement address as both “a toughly-worded speech that seemed aimed at preparing Americans for a potential war with Iraq” and “a forceful distillation and refinement of the war themes of the Bush presidency since Sept. 11.”<sup>37</sup> But there is something more involved in this address than its bellicosity.

Like presidential funerary addresses described earlier by Madden, this particular presidential commencement address seems

capable of trivializing the horrors of war, closing off the possibilities of effective opposition to militaristic solutions. Such discourse practices may obscure the difference between justifying war in terms of sacred ideographs (peace and liberty) and glorifying public faith in the American credo of war at a particular moment of national celebration [e.g., a graduation speech]. By collapsing this distinction, the epideictic creates the discursive possibilities for an uncritical celebration of war.<sup>38</sup>

To engage in war on behalf of the state becomes both a duty and a badge of honor. By being discursively framed as pursuing just ends, such as liberty and justice and democracy over autocracy, dictatorship, and tyranny, war is revealed to be a just means to accomplish a noble end. However, the particular war and the particular situation at the time will often calibrate this judgment. Thus, when people begin to examine closely the reasons for going to war, the strategies, and the outcomes, and when each is found wanting, our evaluations can change. Support can turn into disagreement, and disagreement can turn into disdain. The result is a nation divided as it experiences increasing calls to cease and desist. Those who vote for war can come to regret it.

In Bush’s case, the epideictic discursive formation is intended to give people a sense of communal purpose and meaning in contemplating engaging Iraq in war. To bring “democracy” to Iraq, we must engage in war, root out the tyrant, and restore liberty. Shooting our way in to bring out democracy in a country or a region has never been entirely anathema to the American political rhetorical script or culture. What is ultimately authorized here is a “military” view of the world. The men and women in uniform represent our last best hope. They are called upon only when all other options have failed, when diplomacy has curdled, negotiations have stalled, and the good-faith efforts of many parties have come to an ignominious end. The heroic efforts of the men and women in uniform are legitimated by the monumental failure of talk and the need for arms, which is usually posited as a last-ditch attempt to restore order and establish the peace. When all human comity has been torn asunder, the honorable thing to do is to take up arms. Dishonor is often the place reserved for those who refuse the call to battle.

<sup>37</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “U.S. Must Act First to Battle Terror, Bush Tells Cadets,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2002, Section I, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Madden, “A Covenant with Death,” 164-165.

No one at West Point on June 1, 2002, would be among that group and it was therefore a perfect place and a perfect occasion for delivering a call to war. After all, even in the larger culture, those who dissent over the reasons for going to war, denigrate its “progress,” or remain skeptical of the fruits of its outcome are often relegated to the shadows of suspicion in that ignoble darkness where inaction seems traitorous and cowardice seems to lurk just behind every “negative” argument and assessment. Bush has a penchant for selecting sites and delivering speeches to audiences that rarely accommodate his opponents. West Point was a perfect place for a president who has opted time and time again for the epideictic form of address. Such a choice, of course, helps keep one in a hermetically sealed environment that ensures that the values trumpeted will rarely be upset by a reality check, at least not without great prodding.

The epideictic discourse featured here can now be reviewed and recast with the benefit of hindsight. The president’s narrative has implications for our notions of war rhetoric, the mythic structure of the nation’s war credo, our own democratic impulses, the president’s preemption doctrine, and ultimately the president’s ability to lead and the nation’s ability to retain its national ethos.

***The Rhetoric of War.*** President Bush utilized an epideictic occasion to launch a major foreign policy initiative intended to justify war with Iraq. Campbell and Jamieson, using the United States War Powers Act of 1973 as their model, define war rhetoric as a genre of discourse “justifying the introduction of the United States Armed Forces into hostilities, or into situations where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by circumstances, and to the continued use of such force in hostilities or in such situations.”<sup>39</sup> Campbell and Jamieson argue that in their rhetorical justifications of war, “presidents attempt to prove that military action is or was the only appropriate response to a clear unavoidable, and fundamental threat. However, although the events that precipitate the intervention are concrete and time-bound, the values being defended are timeless and enduring.” These authors point to a style of discourse that is both urgent and plaintive: “The tone is exhortative, calling on Congress and the citizenry to put aside dissent and unite in committing themselves to protect fundamental values through combat. It is a rhetoric of immediacy, calling for action now.” For Campbell and Jamieson, the key to rhetorical attempts to justify war is for the president to mount “a narrative detailing the events that constitute the threat and showing that military intervention has become a last resort. In such a rhetoric, presidents ask the audience—Congress and the public—to empower them to act as commander in chief leading a crusade to preserve the nation and civilization itself.”<sup>40</sup>

Many of these components have manifested themselves in the Bush administration’s various attempts to justify the war in Iraq. Reviewing these characteristics in light of the introduction of the preemption doctrine at West Point reveals that Bush’s discourse also displays most of the characteristics outlined above. One *major exception* is Bush’s introduction of the preemption doctrine. For the president, the argument justifying the use of force is not so much an appeal to war as a “last resort” as it is characterized as a necessary “first resort” due

<sup>39</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 101.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words*, 122.

to the changed post-9/11 environment and the ominous threat posed by and circumstances associated with global terrorism. I believe that Bush's use of the justificatory epideictic form on June 1 provided an opportune occasion and a well-honed venue that allowed him the luxury of bypassing the traditional "last resort" argument. This is significant. If future presidents continue this line of discourse (and the policy it enumerates), they will be changing the face of war rhetoric as well as the criteria rhetoricians have traditionally used to analyze it.

***The American War Credo.*** The American war credo is difficult to supplant because its mythic cultural authority is powerful. Its historical referents are compelling and the values proffered are comforting. In particular, the credo provides a simple and seemingly unimpeachable explanation for war and it makes the loss of life and casualties that inevitably accompany war meaningful, if not redemptive, through its appeal to heroic sacrifice on behalf of a just cause.

The American war credo only becomes diminished when there is doubt, but the acceptable evidence that produces doubt is often hard to come by. If encountered, it is often ignored or disbelieved. Duty, honor, and country are powerful epideictic ideographs and they, along with the starry-eyed goal of "spreading democracy," argue powerfully for citizens to "stay the course." How can Americans "cut and run" from their most precious values? If the counter-evidence that speaks against the creed cannot be ignored, then it is often relegated to the back pages of our news media and our collective consciousness. But if in time this evidence cannot be relegated to the back pages and begins to draw attention and slowly but inevitably takes hold of a populace, it can be devastating to a war president.

For George W. Bush, who seemingly has tethered his whole presidency and its implied legacy on the outcome of the war in Iraq, this was quite a gamble. The president's credibility gap widened as the discomfiting facts slowly seeped in; in time, he began to seem more and more *unqualified* to represent and defend the American war credo. Our moral leadership was being questioned not only by the world, but by ordinary Americans who began to see the American war credo break down before their very eyes. The stark facts were intruding at breakneck speed and compellingly hard and difficult to overcome. The actions, the dissembling, and the weak explanations slowly and painfully created a disquietude that helped break our covenantal bonds of trust. Indeed, the arguments Bush employed in favor of the Iraq war such as connecting Saddam to the atrocities of 9/11; misleading statements on Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological capacities; and the ability to deliver those WMDs to the U.S. homeland all rang hollow as additional contravening evidence mounted.

The U.S. war credo was also unraveling as U.S. citizens began to hold a mirror up to the conduct of the "war on terror" and were horrified to find an alien image. The failure of leadership that seemed to accompany this war was made more horrific by the haunting images Americans encountered in the Abu Ghraib coverage. Our self-image as defenders of freedom was belied by the photos of U.S.-inspired-and-led torture. Our shared values of freedom of religion seemed tarnished in the stories of the destruction of the Quran and assorted attempts to humiliate Muslims by engaging in acts counter not only to their traditional values but also to basic human decency. At Guantanamo Bay, prisoners of war were labeled "enemy combatants" and denied due process. Other terrorist "enemies" were denied access to the courts and tortured in foreign countries under "extraordinary rendition." Furthermore, our quest for democracy abroad seemed to suffer from post-9/11 security measures at home as the nation

grew wary over measures that seemed clear violations of civil liberties. It just struck many Americans as ironic at best and hypocritical at worst that while we were fighting to bring a fledgling democracy along in the Middle East, we were eavesdropping on our own citizens at home and circumventing normal conventions of due process for prisoners at home and abroad.

Even leaving the initial discursive deceptions aside and even if events at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo could be seen as aberrations, and even if one was willing to live with the added disquietude of the implementation of a homeland security that might leave innocent Americans subject to wiretaps, this latest American war effort unfolded in a way that precluded anticipation or realization of the prosecution of a just war or even its eventual success. Reports of inadequate troop strength and protection, poor post-war planning, and a seeming inability to train enough Iraqis to take over the security of their own country all militated against any real confidence that the United States was exercising prudence in its execution of the Iraq war. Then came the rather daunting realization that our troops were seemingly, and inexplicably, trying to “spread democracy” in Iraq while Iraqis themselves seemed to be engaged in civil war. Such details were learned slowly, gradually seeping into our national consciousness in dribs and drabs, mostly after-the-fact, and they militated mightily against an epideictic discourse of any sustained duration and influence.

In essence, the war credo’s mythic structure was upended and finally pierced by disconfirming and uncomfortable factual information that led to differing conclusions about the reason, direction, feasibility, pre-and-post-war planning, and ultimate moral validity of this particular war. Certainly the 2006 mid-term elections were in part a referendum on the Iraq war and its perceived inelegant, incompetent, rambling, and numbing prosecution. To “stay the course” in this instance meant that America had lost its way as it fumbled through a series of treacherous rationales and activities that wasted lives and treasure and subverted the national ethos. The weight of world opinion and U.S. public opinion had finally cracked the mythos of the war credo because the evidence that turned up told a different story; the counter-narrative it evoked was disconcerting, embarrassing, and finally devastating.

***Spreading Democracy.*** Bostdorff has suggested that “President Bush’s epideictic discourse swept away [the] complexities of democratization . . . in favor of a simple and seemingly timeless principle: world peace will only come with democratization.”<sup>41</sup> Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson has offered an interesting take on this particular argument, which speaks to the potential constraints of the president’s epideictic style and the policy he pursued employing such discourse: “As we now know,” writes Patterson, “the war was motivated less by any real evidence of Iraqi involvement with terrorism than by the neoconservatives’ belief that they could stabilize the Middle East by spreading freedom there. Their erroneous assumption was a relic from the liberal past: the doctrine that freedom is a natural part of the human condition.” Importantly, “A disastrously simple-minded argument followed from this: that because freedom is instinctively ‘written in the hearts’ of all peoples, all that is required for its spontaneous flowering in a country that has known only tyranny is the forceful removal of the tyrant and his party.” For Patterson, a “basic flaw” in the president’s and his advisers’ approach was in “their failure to distinguish Western beliefs about freedom from those critical features of

---

<sup>41</sup> Bostdorff, “George W. Bush, Epideictic Advocacy,” 25.

it that non-Western peoples were likely to embrace.”<sup>42</sup> If Patterson is correct, it seems that the president’s and his advisers’ ideological commitments simply displaced and overwhelmed their cultural understanding. This was a failure of profound consequence.

***Holding on to the Doctrine of Preemption.*** Some might argue that the appeal for preemptive action has now been made less palpable in that preemptive action in Iraq has been tried and judged a failure, both as an attempt to bring democracy and as an instrument for reducing global terrorism. Many argue that there are more terrorists in Iraq now than before the war began. Others point to inconsistency in the application of the doctrine arguing that there are potentially greater threats in North Korea and Iran; yet the preemption doctrine seems to have been bypassed in these instances. Bush’s second term in office has been marked by a more moderate tone and he has counseled patience rather than resort to immediate military action. This might indicate that the preemption doctrine is losing favor or has already experienced a decline.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of the status of the doctrine itself, the Bush administration’s latest diplomatic efforts do seem to reflect a new *realpolitik* in which heady attempts to “spread democracy” are being replaced with more moderate goals such as the achievement of “stability” in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, the president has found it difficult to relinquish his global vision and his preemptive doctrine. On May 27, 2006, President Bush addressed West Point graduates yet again. He told the cadets that his policy was similar to that of Harry Truman’s during the inauguration of the Cold War; that like Truman, he was in the process “of laying the foundations of victory.” As one *Washington Post* reporter described the speech, “Bush recounted his strategy for fighting terrorism, saying the United States continues to consider any country that harbors a terrorist to be as guilty as the terrorist being harbored. He was applauded when he discussed his doctrine of preemptive strikes—attacking enemies abroad before they can attack U.S. soil.”<sup>45</sup> So, despite sometimes mixed diplomatic signals, President Bush continued to show little interest in rhetorical retreat. The president contended that we were neither winning nor losing the war in Iraq as he defended sending in 20,000 more troops (labeled a “surge”), not only to stabilize Iraq, but also to continue to prosecute the global “war on terror.”<sup>46</sup> At this writing, over 4,000 U.S. troops have now given their lives in service to their country in the Iraq war. One wonders if the president’s own words and deeds have produced a quagmire from which he cannot extricate himself; it is surely one that his successor will also inherit with its attendant and intractable difficulties.

***The Moral High Ground.*** In creating a generally stable—and therefore a more simplistic and shareable—moral universe, the president often engages in a significant socio-political

<sup>42</sup> Orlando Patterson, “God’s Gift?” Op-Ed Guest Editorial, *The New York Times*, December 19, 2006, A33.

<sup>43</sup> David E. Sanger, “Bush’s Shift: Being Patient with Foes,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2006, A9.

<sup>44</sup> See e.g., Michael Slackman, “News Analysis: In Egypt, Rice Speaks Softly,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2007, A1.

<sup>45</sup> Deb Riechmann, “Bush Likens Fighting Radicals to Cold War: Graduating Cadets Are Told the Struggle Will ‘End on Your Watch,’” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2006, A08.

<sup>46</sup> Bush’s January 2007 nationally televised address calling for more than 20,000 additional troops in Iraq was one of the few times the president had ever publicly admitted mistakes in conducting the war in Iraq (and by implication the implementation of his preemptive doctrine). See David E. Sanger, “The Struggle for Iraq; Bush Adding 20,000 U.S. Troops; Sets Goal of Securing Baghdad,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2007, A1.

action that can assure his audience of a particularly useful but largely Manichaeic moral order. To wit: audiences are assured that good will triumph over evil; right will trump might; honor will prevail over dishonor, and our better angels will triumph over our darker impulses. This ideological triumphalism is premised on human nature and audience complicity. As Mundell notes, "A binding force in a community is the agreement to act *as if* there is an accepted definition of good and evil. Such a 'truth' helps establish meaning in a community. If there is a community-defined good to aspire to, and be acknowledged for, our conduct matters somehow." Thus, "The subject matter of good and evil and the concern with the present are two critical ingredients in an epideictic experience. Concern with the present includes concern with eternity; it addresses what 'is.'"<sup>47</sup> For this reason, all presidents need to use care in their descriptions of "good" and "evil" and they ought to be intentionally circumspect in their descriptions of reality. This requires a rather hefty dose of prudence and a rather large measure of responsible public address.

For a president, epideictic rhetoric establishes the moral grounding for public policy deliberation. A president so disposed can make much of the attendant discourse premised upon discussions of good and evil as a measure for community welfare and public policy. Our mission is noble and our calling is sacrosanct. Scapegoating others (sometimes labeled "enemies") with implied "lesser" ideals, ignoble aims, and treacherous goals relegates them to the dustbins of history and the margins of public policy and, ultimately, public memory. This message is reinforced in the tales of individual heroism and glory accomplished under the banner and on behalf of a just and righteous nation-state. This can become a particularly important tool when the president seeks to inspire the nation to take on a new challenge. It also is the kind of discourse that is especially difficult to challenge because its ideographic-mythic status seems sacrosanct and self-evident.

Over time, however, developments associated with the Iraq war increasingly led to the obfuscation, if not the obliteration, of our nation's abstract epideictic goals. When the facts on the ground did not square with the American values we had been advised we were acting on, the result, for many Americans, was to question their leaders and the rhetorical premises upon which the war was launched. The inevitable moral comparison of ends and means was found wanting. As a result, a nation was divided.

## Conclusion

Bush's commencement address at West Point served his immediate audience well, but its larger implications remain suspect. In the hands of President Bush and his administration, epideictic address has been employed to build a culture of war. In promoting liberty and global democracy largely in military terms, the president and his administration have lost friends and potential allies, made negotiation more difficult, upended chances for conciliatory gestures, precluded opportunities to learn from different cultures, and perhaps most importantly, sacrificed U.S. moral leadership on the fires of abstract ideological expediency. This is to say

---

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Lloyd Mundell, "A Critical Review and Synthesis of Some Ways of Identifying Epideictic." M.A. Thesis. Directed by Kenneth A. Harwood. University of Houston. May 1983, 128-129.



nothing of the human cost of the Iraq war. All of these difficulties have made prosecuting the larger war on terror more difficult and less intelligible.

Epideictic discourse remains essential to the enactment of the office of the presidency and to solidifying our notions of presidential leadership. In speaking to a dynamic present, how the president enacts epideictic discourse is a primary embodiment of what the president does in the exercise of his presidential duties. If the president is to give voice to the ethos of the nation and assist the United States in both securing and defending the moral high ground, high-minded words must match deeds and policies must uphold stated values. Otherwise, the rhetoric of moral righteousness rings hollow and leadership is impaired. Epideictic discourse embeds the president in the moral obligation of the presidency itself. Dishonor lies in its use as a tool of deception or as a crutch for a flawed policy.