

**The Same Old Story:  
Presidential Rhetoric and Interpreting September 11<sup>th</sup>**  
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## **Introduction and Background**

Producing rhetoric in the form of speeches is one of the major functions of the modern American president. The circumstances, purposes, form, content, and effects of presidential speeches vary widely, as do methods of and reasons for analyzing them. The occasions for these speeches vary as well; some are routine, determined by the political calendar. Some are responses to traumatic events—social or political ruptures. Although these are not the only kinds of presidential rhetoric, they lie at opposite ends of the spectrum and will be the focus of this paper. My main concern is with the latter type: particularly, President George W. Bush's speeches on and immediately after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. But in order to contextualize these speeches, I will first consider speeches of these two opposing types, beginning as early as 1957. My analysis will take place on several levels. I will investigate the realities that the speeches construct, using Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad to identify the elements of the speeches and their interactions. The patterns these elements form lead to a useful characterization of the two genres of presidential rhetoric in question, and I will discuss the distinct roles that these genres play in the presidents' interpretation of reality. This analytical structure will be developed in terms of cold war and post-cold war presidential rhetoric and then applied to George W. Bush's speeches. I will consider the dramatic elements and the concept of genre in regard to these speeches in order to trace and examine the interpretation Bush constructs of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Because of their magnitude and unprecedented nature, these events disrupted most aspects of life in the United States, including presidential rhetoric. How Bush

recovered from this disruption both informs our understanding of presidential rhetoric and is informed by it.

It will be useful to formulate the theoretical and methodological background of my analysis. I must first clarify my use of the concept of genre. Following M. M. Bakhtin's argument that "[t]he speaker's speech will is manifested primarily in the *choice of a particular speech genre*" (Bakhtin 126), a fundamental task is to consider the genre of the speeches analyzed, but the concept of genre is a complicated one. Wendy Griswold describes genre as "an inherently social relationship" (Griswold 1987: 18) noting that most critics no longer claim that "genres have any ontological status" (ibid.: 17). Griswold describes two approaches to genre, drawing on the work of E. D. Hirsch and Adena Rosmarin. The first concerns an author's intentional formulation of a cultural artifact within a particular genre and the second concerns a critic's use of genre as a heuristic in analyzing an artifact. This paper will use mainly the second approach in analyzing presidential speeches—Griswold recognizes that this approach is generally of more interest. However, before addressing genre per se, I must, as Griswold says, "[employ] a convenient fiction for the time being" and "treat genre as if it were a property of a cultural object" (ibid. 17). Thus I will begin by considering speeches that are given ritually, based on the calendar rather than events. The most prominent of these are "State of the Union" addresses. Then I will examine speeches occasioned by situations that can be recognized as crises. It has been argued that such speeches belong to the genre of "crisis rhetoric." However, the status of this particular genre and what its characteristics might be has been the subject of some debate. As this debate comes to bear directly on the present analysis, it is worthwhile to examine it here.

Theodore Otto Windt was the first to articulate the view, now widely held, that crises in the United States are created not by the situation, but by the President. A crisis exists when and only when the President describes it as such. (This is an important instance of language creating reality, a concept that will be addressed later.) Windt writes, “a crisis that does not involve an external military attack on the United States is a political event rhetorically created by the President in which the public predictably rallies to his defense” (Windt 1973: 8). This initial caveat presumably means that in such situations, the public comes to understand an event as constituting a crisis through means other than the President. However, Windt seems not to allow for the possibility that this would happen in a situation other than an external attack; surely he has oversimplified the issue. Bonnie J. Dow deals with this type of situation much more adequately, as will be discussed later. Windt goes on to identify three characteristic stages of crisis rhetoric. First, the President asserts that he is in possession of New Facts which are the reason for the speech and which constitute a New Situation (Windt 1973: 9). In the second part of the speech Windt argues that the President provides “a devil-angel interpretation” of the facts, emphasizing “the sinister motives of the enemy even as he accentuates the pure motives of the United States” (ibid.: 10). In the third part of the speech, the President makes clear that supporting him or her and the course of action he or she has taken is an ethical matter: it is “a mark of character and honor for the American people to support the President’s decision” (Windt 1973: 12). In Windt’s model, the movement from the second to the third part of the speech opens up a space for the president to justify the government’s actions and policies. Because the US is Good and the enemy is Bad, the course of action the US has taken is Good, and it is Good to support it.

This basic structure of crisis speeches is widely accepted, but some researchers and theorists have revised and added to it. Richard A. Cherwitz and Kenneth S. Zagacki argue that not all crisis speeches attempt to justify the US response to a situation; some crisis speeches *are* the US response, where the US claims higher moral ground because it did not react violently (Cherwitz and Zagacki 1986). Bonnie J. Dow describes two other kinds of crisis rhetoric. One Dow calls “deliberative rhetoric” and goes on to identify its two main characteristics: “1) reliance on evidence that [is] directly relevant to the situation being discussed rather than the values underlying it, and 2) emphasis on the rational character of the decisions made” (Dow 1989: 303). The second kind of rhetoric is “epideictic” and is a departure from Windt’s idea that all crises are necessarily created by the president. In epideictic rhetoric, a president is responding to a situation that the public already perceives as having great significance (Dow 1989: 295). That is, the first information received and attitudes formed about the situation came from a source other than the president. But the president nonetheless “creates a communal meaning for the event which is consistent with the community’s existing beliefs and values and which guides the response of its members” (Dow 1989: 297). Dow argues that speeches of this kind “1) dissociate the nation from responsibility for the crisis, 2) place the event within a value-laden context of similar situations, and 3) urge perseverance in present policy rather than changes in policy” (Dow 1989: 297).

Thus we have a fairly detailed picture of crisis rhetoric. However, although these considerations will prove useful, it is important to note that some see them as problematic. Carole Blair and David W. Houck argue that the writings on crisis rhetoric described above, as well as others, “demonstrate an ambivalence about the status of crisis

rhetoric as a genre and about the relationship of crisis rhetoric to situation” (Blair and Houck 1994: 92). They follow one of Griswold’s lines and conclude that an approach to presidential crisis rhetoric should follow Rosmarin’s example. Thus genre should be considered not “an empirically given and observable category” nor a “verifiable truth claim” (ibid. 94), but “a constructive and creative act of critical formulation...a critical heuristic” (ibid. 98). As mentioned above, this is also the approach that I will follow. I will use genre as a tool to illuminate various aspects of the speeches I discuss, considering both when and how they apply usefully and when and how they do not. By discussing the genre of the speeches I consider, I will shed light on what role they play in regard to the interpretation of reality that the president presents.

My analysis of the speeches themselves is based on Kenneth Burke’s five dramatic elements: agent, act, purpose, scene, and agency (Burke 1989: 135). The agent is the subject or actor that brings about the act or event. The agent must do the act intentionally; i.e., he or she must have a purpose. Also, there is always some context, or scene, in which the act takes place. Agency refers to the means the agent employs in doing the act. In any speech, the speaker (here, the President) talks about a world in which these five elements participate and interact in complex ways. And by talking about this world, the President creates it in an important sense. It is not our concern here to detail the intricacies of this claim, for there are many. We will simply accept that, as Murray Edelman argues, “Language does not mirror an objective ‘reality,’ but rather creates it by organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world” (Edelman 1971: 66). (Indeed, if this were not the case, crisis rhetoric would not be interesting at all, for every speech would simply objectively describe particular

events.) Thus identifying the elements of the dramatic pentad helps illuminate elements of the reality that speeches create. The effect of this reality on the audience and on national and international politics is an important and complicated issue, but one that will not be discussed in depth here. This paper is concerned with the reality presented by the president.

### **Cold War Speeches**

Although the rhetorical elements and processes that I will discuss did not come into existence with the cold war, I will begin my analysis after World War II, with President Eisenhower's State of the Union address of 1957. This time period is a good place to start an analysis of modern presidential rhetoric: World War II is over, the United States is settling into the cold war in its new world role as one of the two superpowers, and the "rhetorical presidency" as described by Jeffery K. Tulis (1987) has a chance to flourish.

The 1957 State of the Union address is a useful speech to consider because in it Eisenhower follows a rhetorical pattern that is prevalent in presidential speeches throughout the cold war and after. In the very beginning of the speech, Eisenhower sets up what will be the most important of Burke's dramatic elements: scene. In one of the first paragraphs, he says,

In the world today, the surging and understandable tide of nationalism is marked by a widespread revulsion and revolt against tyranny, injustice, inequality and poverty. As individuals, joined in a common hunger for freedom, men and women and even children pit their spirit against guns and tanks. On a larger scale, in an ever more persistent search for the self-respect of authentic sovereignty and the economic base on which national independence must rest, peoples sever old ties; seek new alliances; experiment—sometimes

dangerously—in their struggle to satisfy these human aspirations. (Eisenhower 1957)

This paragraph describes at length the reality that is the background of the speech. The listeners are to understand the rest of the speech in relation to this scene: a melodrama in which freedom-loving people struggle against those who would take their freedom away. Thus this is the basis of the reality constructed; all of the other dramatic elements are defined in relation to the scene of struggle. Eisenhower says that “our character as a Nation commit[s] us to a high role in world affairs” (Eisenhower 1957). Here the outstanding characteristic of the agent, America, is that it is by nature a player in the scene of “world affairs.” And this nature is defined by the element of purpose; namely, upholding certain values (“human liberty,” “human welfare,” “human progress,” among others). Thus the agent and its purpose interact in their contact with the scene, as Americans “apply [these principles] to current events” (ibid.). Eisenhower reiterates these three elements later in the speech, when he “turn[s] to the international scene” in earnest. First he identifies the scene as the “continuing threat to the free world...” and in relation to this threat makes it clear that America’s (the agent’s) purpose is, in opposition to the threat, to uphold and advance “security and peace.” Interestingly, the remaining two elements of the dramatic pentad are only vaguely present. Eisenhower names such acts as “research and development for more efficient weapons,” “continuing negotiations,” and “participation in the International Atomic Energy Agency” as acts that constitute the pursuit of the purpose. These acts are related to the equally vague mentions of the means (agency) of pursuing the purpose; Eisenhower mentions “military strength” and “orderly and proper operation of existing arrangements.” Thus although all five dramatic elements are present in Eisenhower’s speech, they are not equally present. The



scene is most potent, and it interacts with the agent (America) and its purpose. What America is actually doing, and how, seems to get swept under the rhetorical rug.

As will be emphasized later, this particular arrangement of dramatic elements, especially the prominence of scene, is common among speeches that we have posited as belonging to the genre of ritual speeches. In contrast is President Kennedy's speech on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1962, which was occasioned by developments in the Cuban Missile Crisis. In this speech, the arrangement and ratios of the dramatic elements are quite different. Although scene is still important, it enters the speech primarily in its relation to other elements that are now in the foreground.

The speech is at first concerned mainly with acts. It opens describing the preparation of "a series of offensive Missile sites" on Cuba (Kennedy 1962) and details the specific acts involved in this preparation, which constitute the major act of an "explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas" (ibid.). The element of agency is woven into this series of acts; the transport and assembly of specific weapons is the means by which the preparation is accomplished, and the preparation, in turn, is the means by which the threat is accomplished. Hardly mentioned but lurking behind all of these acts is the agent, identified as "the Soviets," "the Soviet Government," and, once, "Communists" (ibid.). Their purpose, as concluded based on their acts, "can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere" (ibid.). Thus in the beginning of the speech, the act is foregrounded and it projects the other elements in relation to itself.

However, when the description of act leads to the identification of scene, scene quickly becomes the most prominent element. This transition is evidenced in the following:

...this secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles...in violation of Soviet assurances, and in defiance of American and hemispheric policy—this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil—is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country...(ibid.)

Here Kennedy addresses these new acts in relation to the status quo, advancing an interpretation of the acts as bringing about a new situation but at the same time placing them within the ongoing scene of conflict with the Soviets. Thus the acts of the Soviets intensify and call our attention to a scene that already exists. Kennedy says that “missiles in Cuba add to an already clear and present danger,” and calls them the “*latest* Soviet threat to world peace” (ibid., emphasis added). This scene is given a prominent place in the speech, and Kennedy now uses it as the starting point to define a new set of dramatic elements, this time concerning the US reaction to the situation in Cuba. The scene of struggle gives the US its purpose, “the defense of our own security” (ibid.), and Kennedy describes the acts the US will undertake and the agency it will use to further this goal. He also makes it clear that in this struggle, the US is by nature the agent fighting for Good: “we are a peaceful people” (ibid.).

According to the characteristics of crisis rhetoric as described by Windt and Dow (as detailed above), this speech is clearly identifiable as belonging to that genre. Following Windt’s framework, Kennedy first presents the New Facts about Soviet activity in Cuba. In our analysis, this is the part of the speech in which the act is the most prominent dramatic element. Then Kennedy compares the US with the Soviet Union,

emphasizing that we are Good and they are Bad. This happens concomitantly with the foregrounding of the scene in which the US and the Soviets are involved in an ongoing struggle. Finally, Kennedy uses this scene to project a characterization of the American agent as Good, and to argue by extension that it is Good to support the decisions of the government. In terms of Dow's framework, Kennedy's speech doesn't fit neatly into one of her two categories. It is similar to deliberative rhetoric in that it emphasizes "the rational character of the decisions made," but is like epideictic rhetoric in that it "creates a communal meaning for the event which is consistent with the community's existing beliefs" (Dow 1989: 297).

These frameworks are clearly useful in describing and identifying crisis speeches. However, crisis rhetoric can be characterized solely in terms of dramatic elements. In this speech, and in other speeches prompted by crisis situations as we shall see, it is the 'act' that first seems to be the element that projects and defines the others, but over the course of the speech scene comes to be the most potent. In ritual speeches, scene is potent throughout. Thus it is now appropriate to posit a definition of crisis and ritual speech genres in these terms. Following Rosmarin's approach to genre, we can use this definition as a tool in analyzing other speeches: as a heuristic that is useful insofar as it sheds light on the object of analysis.

Indeed, this definition proves quite useful, as it brings to the fore patterns present in speeches throughout the cold war and beyond. In Johnson's speeches on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, he first describes the "hostile actions" against US ships and then shows how these actions reinforce the existing scene. He says that the "new act of aggression...brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle

for peace and security in southeast Asia” and declares that “[t]hese latest actions...[have] given a new and grave turn to the already serious situation in southeast Asia” (Johnson 1964a). He continues to emphasize this existing scene as he more or less vaguely outlines the other dramatic elements. He says,

This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity. Our military and economic assistance to South Vietnam and Laos in particular has the purpose of helping these countries to repel aggression and strengthen their independence. (Johnson 1964b)

Here the acts, purpose, and agency of the US in response to the situation are clearly set within the greater understanding of scene.

Nixon’s speech announcing the incursion into Cambodia follows the same pattern. First is a description of the act: “North Vietnam has increased its military aggression” (Nixon 1970a). Then Nixon couches this act and the other elements in the ongoing scene:

Small nations all over the world find themselves under attack from within and without. If when the chips are down the world’s most powerful nation—the United States of America—acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world. (ibid.)

The role and purpose of the US as agent are clearly defined and the underlying concept of a struggle for freedom is emphasized.

In several of Johnson and Nixon’s ritual addresses, scene is not as obviously emphasized as in Eisenhower’s speech examined above. A plausible reason for this is simply that the scene, of struggle against Communists generally and against North Vietnam particularly, is so well recognized and understood already that it does not need to be stressed; it is the clear but unstated point of reference for all of the other dramatic elements. This becomes obvious when, in their speeches, both presidents make reference

to the US dealing with and evaluating “the world as it is” (Johnson 1965, Nixon 1970b), not as what it was or what we would like it to be. That they make this reference without describing “the world” in any detail is powerful evidence of the scene that is present in everyone’s mind and need not be reiterated. Instead, Johnson and Nixon in these speeches focus on America’s purposes in relation to the scene, and America as an agent with values and principles that ground those purposes. This assumption that the scene of struggle is understood by all is actually powerful support for the scene, because it assumes it to be so basic that it does not need to be presented or stressed. Thus analyzing these speeches as ritual speeches, as one is inclined to do, is appropriate and informative, as it calls attention to the implicit prevalence of the scene element. These speeches have few and vague descriptions of any acts or agency in regard to foreign policy.

Scene also plays an important but mainly implicit role in presidential rhetoric during the Ford and Carter administrations. In this period, the United States was ostensibly relatively at peace with the rest of the world. The presidents emphasize this in their State of the Union addresses, but there is still evidence of struggle in the international scene. The presidents show concern for “our security in a world that is still hostile to freedom” (Ford 1976) and stress the need to “discourage the spread of hostile ideologies in this hemisphere” and “ease tensions between [the US and the Soviet Union]” (Carter 1978). Perhaps during these years international events were not of constant and immediate concern as in previous years, but the same overarching scene still lurked in the background. Clearly, no one had forgotten that the cold war was still going on.

Certain presidential speeches during these years, and especially during the Carter administration, shed an interesting light on our story when analyzed as crisis speeches. The major international situation that was understood as a crisis during Carter's years as president was the hostage situation in Iran that started in November of 1979. Although beginning on November 5<sup>th</sup> there were several brief announcements by the White House in regard to the situation, and Carter alluded to it briefly in other speeches, he did not devote a speech to addressing the situation until November 12<sup>th</sup>, when he announced that the US would discontinue importing oil from Iran. This speech is quite short and focuses entirely on the acts of the Iranians and of the United States and on the role of American agents in responding to the situation. The only hint of a scene element is the identification of "a grave situation" and "a difficult task and a test" facing Americans (Carter 1979c). Although this situation came to be considered a crisis, Carter seems to have played a relatively minor role in labeling it as such, and the speech in question resists our definition of crisis speeches. In other speeches Carter places the situation within the scene of "international terrorism" (Carter 1979b), but he does not, as we would expect, interpret the crisis in reference to a background of the ongoing cold war.

However, Carter's rhetorical relationship with crises does not end here. Throughout his presidency he dealt with the so-called "energy crisis." The rhetorical culmination of this crisis occurred in Carter's "Malaise speech," given on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1979. This speech couches the energy crisis within a larger "crisis of confidence." Although this crisis is an entirely domestic one and no specific event brought it about, the speech that labels and addresses it, when analyzed as a crisis speech, clearly falls into the patterns of previous presidents' crisis speeches. Carter opens by quoting at length a

number of supposedly average Americans with whom he has spoken in the past few days about the state of the country. These quotations identify problems in the US and serve as the ‘act’ element of the speech. Though they are clearly not acts of a foreign agent as in other crisis speeches, the gathering of them is an event that has provided the president with New Facts (as in Windt’s framework) about the state of the nation, which he now shares with a national audience. And given these New Facts, Carter immediately provides a scene in which they can be interpreted: they are evidence of “a fundamental threat to American democracy” (Carter 1979a). He says,

All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to...the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. This path leads to true freedom for our Nation and ourselves. We can take the first steps down that path as we begin to solve our energy problem.

He later warns that “this struggle for freedom” will not be easy (ibid.). It is not entirely clear what exactly energy has to do with freedom, but Carter has nonetheless used the “struggle for freedom” concept as the scene of the energy crisis. At times his rhetoric is exactly parallel to other presidents’ rhetoric in regard to communism. Although Carter did not use this scene of struggle in earlier speeches, it is still available and potent as a ground for understanding crises, even if the crisis in question is seemingly completely unrelated to foreign affairs.

This scene has been maintained, explicitly or implicitly, by the rhetoric of all cold war presidents, and President Reagan once again gives it a prominent and explicit rhetorical role. In a State of the Union address toward the end of his presidency, Reagan directly addresses the history and current state of the cold war, bringing the ongoing international scene to the forefront of his speech. He goes so far as to quote other presidents, including Franklin Roosevelt on maintaining peace in our hemisphere and

Truman and Kennedy on the importance of fighting international communism (Reagan 1987). He says,

The responsibility of freedom presses us towards higher knowledge and, I believe, moral and spiritual greatness. Through lower taxes and smaller government, government has its ways of freeing people's spirits...Excellence is what makes freedom ring. (ibid.)

The United States as an agent and its lofty purposes are clearly on the side of Good in the struggle for freedom. Thus the scene that has been present in the background for years is now once again at the center of presidential rhetoric.

### **The Meta-Narrative**

Because of the prevalence of the scene that we have seen thus far, this element deserves more careful examination. In both crisis and ritual speeches, the scene either is in the beginning or becomes over the course of the speech the element upon which the others are based and from which they draw their meaning. Thus in both types of speeches, the president seems to consider it important to place current events and policies in a larger context. In the words of D. Ray Heisey, "leader[s] must find the acceptable images of political reality suitable for [their] people" (Heisey 1986: 333). These "images of political reality" become the background for the speech; used as the scene, they provide a frame in reference to which all other elements can be understood. This frame is an over-arching way of understanding the world that is supported and sustained by countless rhetorical instances. It is a meta-narrative that is in the background of all speeches and thus governs the understanding and interpretation of events that the president presents; it lies at the base of the rhetorical reality that the president constructs.



Others have examined the issue of a meta-narrative in presidential speeches even before the cold war. This meta-narrative is always a struggle of Us versus Them; it is some formulation of the struggle between Good and Evil. Robert L. Ivie writes that during the Revolutionary War, the British were painted as savages, which is one of the major brands of evil that is still consistently evoked. He also quotes President Franklin Roosevelt as predicting the victory of “righteousness” over the evil “forces of savagery and barbarism” (Ivie 1980: 283) and chronicles the use of images Good and Evil to frame conflict by presidents such as Madison, Polk, and McKinley.

Many cold war presidents also capitalize on the image of “savage” as falling under the umbrella concept of Evil. Other popular metaphors are “a mortal threat to freedom, a germ infecting the body politic, [and] a plague upon the liberty of humankind” (Medhurst et al. 1990: 72). In his ideological analysis, Philip Wander identifies two manifestations of the Us versus Them paradigm which these metaphors (and others) enforce. The first, “prophetic dualism,” was ushered in by the Eisenhower administration and is marked by explicitly religious language, emphasizing the conflict between Good and Evil. The metaphorical identification of the United States with the chosen people is so strong as to become literalized; John Foster Dulles said, “The reality of the matter is that the United States, by every standard of measurement, is the world’s greatest power not only materially but spiritually” (Medhurst et al. 1990: 160). In contrast, the “Communist menace” is atheist and therefore evil.

President Kennedy attacked this explicit identification of the US as Good and the Communists as Evil. Instead of a Holy War, he advocated another mode of understanding US foreign relations; Wander calls this mode “technocratic realism.” The

conflict with the Soviets is a “peaceful, though vigorous, competition” (Medhurst et al. 1990: 165) that is to be won through cool rationality and reason. Although technocratic realism moves away from overt melodrama, it still clearly supports an understanding of foreign affairs as a struggle between Us and Them. Now the United States is seen as rational, intelligent, and peace-loving: Kennedy describes its course as “one of patience and restraint, as befits a powerful and peaceful nation” (Kennedy 1962). The USSR, on the other hand, is seen as irrational and bent on destruction: it is “reckless...and provocative” and on a “course of world domination” (ibid.).

This brand of the meta-narrative carried through into the Johnson administration. Ivie demonstrates how characterizations of the enemy as savage and the US as a victim is a metaphor perfectly suited to maintain and build upon the Us versus Them theme in technocratic realism. He writes, “a people strongly committed to the ideal of peace, but simultaneously faced with the reality of war, must believe that the fault for any such disruption of their ideal lies with others...Victimage rhetoric resolves this potential difficulty by offering redemption through the identification of a suitable and plausible scapegoat” (Ivie 1974: 280). Ivie goes on to show that during Johnson’s presidency, the Vietnamese communists were “portrayed as savage because of a stubborn commitment to violence and unwillingness to negotiate with the United States,” where as the US was peaceful, rational, and always willing to negotiate.

It is important to note that Soviets were not the only people occupying the “Them” position; the Us/Them distinction is versatile and can be appropriated to advocate a variety of (often opposing) positions. Ivie shows how Edward R. Murrow was able to use the language commonly associated with the Communists in describing

Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (the most severe and influential of the anti-Communists), thus making him into an other, not one of Us, and bringing him closer to his demise. What is important here is that although the metaphor was twisted around to identify McCarthy with the Bad rather than the Good, the placement of the Communists within the Us versus Them paradigm was never questioned. Indeed, it was reinforced, because McCarthy was aligned with the Communists and then both were attacked.

These various formulations and manifestations of the meta-narrative of foreign policy can all be boiled down to the same basic struggle. Furthermore, both in speeches identifiable as crisis speeches and as ritual speeches, this struggle forms the ultimate background and manifests itself as the scene element. Thus in every speech we have seen, the meta-narrative of struggle is the frame through which the president presents the facts and events he describes. It shapes the interpretation of the reality he presents, painting the world in simple black and white. It is important to note that the struggle is indeed worldwide, and there is no space left for neutrality; the whole world is either on one side or the other.

It has been argued that without the looming enemy of the Soviet Union upon which to base the meta-narrative of foreign conflict, post-cold-war presidents have been unable to successfully frame foreign crises (Kuypers 1997). Although addressing this claim fully would require a definition of success that would take us too far afield, the nature of the meta-narrative we have been discussing must be addressed. Does it, as Kuypers claims, rest necessarily on the international enemy of Communist Soviets? Put in terms of the role of the meta-narrative as we have been discussing it, is the only reality a president can construct one in which the communists are the bad guys? We have

already seen variations on this arrangement, and examining the rhetoric of post-cold-war presidents (namely Clinton and two Bushes) in terms of the two genres we have defined shows that the communists need not be present at all. These presidents are able to recast the element of scene and still use it as the driving rhetorical force in their speeches. They simply replace the communists with some other enemy, who can be presented in more or less detail. It so happens that this role generally came to be filled by an Arab or Islamic group of one kind or another, but this is of little consequence here. What is important is that the Us versus Them meta-narrative is sustained as the basic reality, regardless of the specific players.

Considering these speeches in terms of our posited genres, we see that the same overall pattern of dramatic elements applies. In speeches such as (the first) President Bush's speech on Iraqi aggression in the Persian Gulf, the president first describes the acts that occasion the speech and then shows how these acts affect the scene. After describing Iraq's attack on Kuwait, Bush says:

We stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment. The crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective—a new world order—can emerge: a new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. (Bush 1990)

Because of his focus on this “new world order,” the motivating element in this speech is actually a kind of purpose/scene hybrid. Bush describes the new order as a future scene, but at present it is a goal. It is what we are trying to reach, and thus the purpose of the current struggle. Presenting the “new world order” as a scene element could be seen as an attempt to construct this new reality via rhetoric and thus actually bring about the new order, at least in the minds of the listeners. Thus Bush identifies this moment in history

as a turning point, and ostensibly as the end of the existing meta-narrative, and he supplies the “new world order” as a new meta-narrative. However, the old meta-narrative is still lurking, as in the phrase “these troubled times,” as the current scene. It becomes clearer later in the speech, when Bush says, “The world is still dangerous” (ibid.). Thus he has not yet succeeded in constructing a new and different scene, and his ritual speeches show that he will not be able to. In his 1991 State of the Union address, although President Bush begins by talking about the movement toward the “new world order,” this concept is not presented as a scene, but rather as a purpose. It is a “big idea” that embodies the “common cause” and the “universal aspirations of mankind” (ibid.). The scene element, on the other hand, is the same as it has always been: Bush describes it as “confront[ing] evil for the sake of good” (Bush 1991) and even explicitly likens it to America’s past of “long struggle against aggressive totalitarianism.” Clearly, the meta-narrative continues in the same rhetorical patterns as always.

Clinton’s rhetoric also presents no exception. Although he does not draw on Bush’s “new world order” concept, his brand of meta-narrative inherits much of its formulation of the Us versus Them struggle from previous presidents. He presents a scene marked by a fight for democracy, peace, and freedom against those who would destroy these things. In his speech on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998, in which he announces US attacks on “terrorist related facilities” (Clinton 1998), he first describes the acts of the terrorists, then the counter-acts of the US, then defines these acts as part of “a long, ongoing struggle between freedom and fanaticism, between the rule of law and terrorism” (ibid.). Although the meta-narrative has never before explicitly named terrorism as an enemy, it is still clearly recognizable as fundamentally the same. Then in his State of the

Union address of 1999, he bases his comments on foreign policy on this same meta-narrative, described in terms of the United States' need to "shape a world that is more peaceful, more secure, more free" and to "meet threats to our nation's security, including increased dangers from outlaw nations and terrorism" (Clinton 1999). Clinton has only slightly revised the scene that has echoed through presidential rhetoric for decades.

### **Genre and the Meta-Narrative**

This meta-narrative was the underlying reality throughout the cold war, and so provided the scene that presidents could draw on to frame the understanding of all agents, acts, purposes, and agency. This holds for our formulations of both crisis and ritual speeches. Returning for a moment to Windt's and Dow's characterizations of crisis rhetoric, it is clear how the meta-narrative enters the picture. In Windt's framework, it enters easily into the second part of the speech, where the president compares the US (being Good) with the enemy (being Bad). Dow describes the placement of the crisis event within a "value-laden context," i.e., a meta-narrative. But perhaps the entrance of the meta-narrative into a crisis speech is most clear when the speech is seen in terms of our definition: as moving from act-motivated rhetoric to scene-motivated rhetoric. In this framework, it is clear that the act is springboard for the meta-narrative (in the form of scene), which then comes to dominate the speech. In the ritual speeches we have seen, on the other hand, the meta-narrative, again expressed as the scene, is prominent throughout and provides a basis for the other elements.

Defining crisis and ritual speeches in terms of their dramatic elements makes it clear how these speeches interact with the meta-narrative, and thus with the basic reality

presented. In crisis speeches, the meta-narrative is brought to bear as act recedes as the most prominent element and scene takes its place. Thus the understanding of the crisis situation itself, as defined by an act or acts, is brought in line with and eventually subsumed by the dominant, consistent, and overarching understanding of foreign affairs in general. Now the listeners (the American public) have a comfortable, pre-established frame through which to understand the new and most likely threatening or frightening situation. The understanding of all the other elements of the situation comes to take place through an already accepted and approved lens, and the reality created by the elements of the speech is simply a minor variation on the reality with which the listeners are already familiar.

This prevalence of the Us versus Them meta-narrative as the framework through which crises come to be interpreted can be seen not only in terms of the scene element of the speech in question, but also, on a larger scale, as a scene that has the potential to affect future realities. A scene that presents reality in terms of good guys (the United States) battling bad guys (its enemies) provides a ground for future acts the US will take against those enemies. Indeed, such acts come to seem inevitable; after all, who would advocate siding with Evil over Good? Thus by introducing and emphasizing this meta-narrative as the scene of a crisis, the president sets up a way to support and justify the actions and policies of the government.

Ritualistic speeches serve to affirm and strengthen the reality advocated in crisis speeches. Sometimes they support it explicitly (like in Eisenhower's State of the Union address analyzed above), and sometimes they simply assume its pervasive presence (as in several of Johnson and Nixon's speeches). In these speeches, the element of act is de-

emphasized and often hardly present at all. Like the other dramatic elements, it is defined only in reference to the scene. In either case, the speeches support the status quo meta-narrative so that it is constantly available and the president can invoke it whenever he or she needs to supply an understanding of a crisis or support for an action.

Having posited these two distinct genres and developed an understanding of their roles in interpreting reality, we will turn to George W. Bush's speeches on and after September 11<sup>th</sup> and use these genres and their characteristics to illuminate how Bush came to interpret these events.

### **Interpreting September 11<sup>th</sup>**

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 threw into chaos much of what many Americans had previously considered their unalterable way of life. Thus it is not surprising that President Bush's attempts to talk about those events do not follow any pre-established pattern of rhetoric. Our question of interest is what pattern does arise, and how does it relate to the speech genres we have established and their roles in the interpretation of reality.

There can be little doubt that the planes flying into the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania created a crisis situation in the United States. However, Windt explicitly excludes the discourse surrounding such events in his analysis of crisis rhetoric; he is only concerned with crises "that [do] not involve an external military attack on the United States" (Windt 1973: 8). Although whether the attack was "military" or not is debatable, it clearly falls into the group that Windt meant to exclude. Dow's formulation of epideictic rhetoric comes closer to accounting for the



rhetoric on and after September 11<sup>th</sup>, in that it deals with events already perceived as serious before the President speaks at all, but it is still inadequate. Perhaps because there was not a perceived need to, Bush did not take pains to “dissociate the nation from responsibility for the crisis,” and he certainly did not “urge perseverance in present policy rather than changes in policy”; on the contrary. He did eventually come to “place the event within a value-laden context of similar situations,” but what concerns us is not that he did so, but how. In answering this question, we turn to the speeches themselves, analyzing them in terms of how they present the dramatic elements, and thus relating them to the genres of crisis and ritual rhetoric as developed above.

The first speech that President Bush made in regard to the attacks was at 9:30am on September 11<sup>th</sup>, half an hour after the second airplane flew into the World Trade Center. The speech was very short, about one minute long, and is based entirely on the element of act; Bush announces that “two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center” (Bush 2001a). The agent of this act he calls simply “those folks who committed this act” (ibid.), and does not overtly address purpose or agency. A second set of indefinite acts is described in response to the main act, involving the helping of the victims and the investigation of the original act; the purposes here are implicit. In reference to these secondary acts, the agents named are Bush himself, the Vice President, the Governor of New York, and the Director of the FBI, and the agency is “the full resources of the federal government” (ibid.). The presentation of these elements gives the impression of specific agents using specific means to accomplish specific goals, but in fact it is entirely unclear who is doing what exactly and how. The several conceptions of scene presented in the speech are neither in reference to the main act nor the response

acts in particular. They are vague, discontinuous conceptions that fail completely to provide a useful frame through which to understand the situation. Bush first says that America is in a “difficult moment,” and later declares it a moment of “national tragedy” (ibid.). These descriptions do little more than allude to at the magnitude and terrible nature of the situation. Then Bush labels the act as “an apparent terrorist attack on our country” This hints at a slightly more specific scene—one involving terrorism. But Bush’s use of the word “apparent” emphasizes the tentativeness of the scene proposed. Only the act itself is clear; how it should be interpreted remains unknown. Bush later asserts that “[t]errorism against our nation will not stand” (ibid.). This vaguely anticipates a scene in which there is some kind of struggle between the US and terrorists and/or terrorism, but the use of the future tense implicitly discourages any definite interpretation of the present moment. Thus no scene is fully realized, leaving the other elements in a chaotic cluster punctuated by the definiteness of the act.

Bush’s second speech of the day presents a different but somewhat more coherent sense of scene, and gives it a somewhat more prominent role, although acts are still the central focus. The first line of this speech is, “Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended” (Bush 2001b). Here the scene can be understood as a trajectory involving the state of having freedom (a state in which the US presumably resides), an attack on that freedom, and then a defense of it. Although this scene is only briefly and vaguely hinted at, it clearly grows out of and is centered on the act that constitutes the attack, which also leads to the counter-acts that constitute the defense. And aside from describing the agent of the act as “a faceless coward,” the entire speech focuses on the response-acts and the elements projected by those response-acts.

Even this formulation of the agent is in the passive voice, diminishing its prominence. Bush speaks vaguely of the actions taken by various other, American agents, “the federal government,” “local authorities,” “the United States” and “our military” (ibid.), with the purposes of helping the victims, “hunt[ing] down and punish[ing] those responsible” and “protect[ing] America and Americans” (ibid.). The agency Bush identifies is simply “whatever is necessary.” At the end of the speech, Bush strongly identifies the element of agent in terms of American character: “The resolve of our great nation is being tested...we will pass this test” (ibid.).

In this second speech, the elements chaotically present in the first speech have been shuffled and altered. Most prominently, although the terms are still vague, the focus is now strongly on the acts of various agents identified with the United States in response to the original act, and, in reference to these response-acts, on the United States itself as an agent with strong character and purpose. Also, both original act and response-acts now project into a scene that is framed by the concept of freedom. This scene is not yet developed into a complete meta-narrative and still plays a relatively minor role in the speech as a whole, but as compared to the weak and disjointed conceptions of scene in the first speech, it represents a step toward coherence and potency.

President Bush’s third and final speech of the day, given at 8:30pm, much more closely resemble the crisis speeches we have seen than do the first two speeches. The speech begins focusing on acts, describing the attacks relatively graphically. Then toward the end, Bush gives the most coherent and specific formulation of scene yet presented. Still, the descriptions of the acts do not entirely comfortably give rise to the

scene; there is still evidence that Bush is struggling to bring the acts into a recognizable and understandable frame of interpretation.

The speech begins with the “series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts...evil, despicable acts of terror,” constituted by “airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing” (Bush 2001c). At first no explicit agent is named (later they are called only “the terrorists who committed these acts” (ibid.)), but for the first time the purpose of the acts is identified: “to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat” (ibid.). Then again there is a description of the response-acts, which lead to the identification of the character of the American agent; America is “[a] great people” of “a great nation...the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world” (ibid.). Toward the end of the speech, these acts and response-acts give rise to the most powerful formulation of scene we have seen thus far: “those who want peace and security in the world...stand together to win the war against terrorism” (ibid.). Thus a new meta-narrative is articulated: the struggle between Us, the peace- and freedom-loving people of the world, and Them, those aligned with the terrorists. And, like the meta-narrative of the cold war, this one serves to divide the world cleanly into two camps; as Bush makes clear, “[w]e will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them” (ibid.).

However, the element of scene in this speech is not this simple; it is complicated by various other characterizations. At first, as he describes the acts themselves, Bush presents the scene of everyday life, promoting the interpretation of the acts as a horrific interruption of our day-to-day existence, rather than as a struggle between larger forces. He describes the victims as normal people (“moms and dads, friends and neighbors”) in

normal situations (“in airplanes, or in their offices”) (ibid.). But this formulation of scene as an interruption of normalcy does not get very far; a few paragraphs later, Bush emphasizes that “[t]he functions of our government” as well as “the American economy” “continue without interruption” (ibid.). There are other inconsistencies in scene as well. Once Bush calls the acts “acts of mass murder,” (ibid.) implying a scene centered on a crime and a criminal rather than on war. He also says that after the first attack, he “implemented our government’s emergency response plans” (ibid.), seemingly promoting for a moment an understanding of the event as an “emergency,” which takes all emphasis off of the agent and agency. Thus although a coherent meta-narrative has entered the picture, it is by no means a clear or all-encompassing one. Bush’s rhetoric is still searching for the best way to frame the events.

But by the next morning, this search was over. Of the speeches thus far seen after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Bush’s remarks after meeting with the National Security Team constitute the speech to which the genre of crisis speeches is most applicable. First, in accordance with Windt’s framework, Bush announces that he has New Facts: “the latest intelligence updates” (Bush 2001d). Then, in light of these New Facts, he not only describes but in fact redefines the events as “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war” (ibid.). These acts are now the basis for a new scene, which Bush succinctly states: “Freedom and democracy are under attack” (ibid.). The agents involved are now defined in terms of this “battle” (ibid.). Although no specific terms are used, Bush describes the “enemy” at length, and declares that we, and indeed “all freedom-loving people everywhere,” “will not allow this enemy to win the war” (ibid.). At the end of the speech, the presence of a meta-narrative hits us over the head; Bush says, “This will be a

monumental struggle of good versus evil” (ibid.). In this speech we see elements of both Windt and Dow’s formulation of crisis rhetoric. Bush clearly describes the two sides as participating in a melodrama, which according to Windt is the second part of any crisis speech. According to Dow, this speech would be clearly epideictic because it “place[s] the event within a value-laden context of similar situations” (Dow 1989: 297). The “value-laden context” is clear; the “similar situations” are less obvious, but implied by the use of the word “war.”

However, the most illuminating way to characterize this speech is as belonging to the genre of crisis rhetoric as defined by the arrangement of the dramatic elements. In this regard, this speech is significant in both its continuities and discontinuities in relation to the three earlier speeches. According to our definition of the genres, the most important dramatic elements to consider in comparing these speeches are act and scene: we have seen that typical crisis speeches begin with a focus on act that then gives way to the predominance of scene, which in turn provides a point of reference from which the other terms are defined. The first speech is clearly driven by the act (a “terrorist attack”), but it presents no clear definition of the act and only several vague and disjointed conceptions of scene. The elements of the second speech are only slightly less chaotic; the focus is still on the details of the acts, which are still basically undefined, and the response-acts, which are equally vague. A scene is implicitly proposed, but it is vague and not very potent; there is just the suggestion that the acts should be interpreted in reference to freedom and an attack thereon. The third speech, which is longer, makes some progress toward defining the acts, calling them “a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts” (Bush 2001c). And although it cannot quite settle on one conception of

scene, it does clearly introduce a struggle between Us and Them and takes steps toward defining these opposing agents. Now, in the fourth speech, there is no question how to interpret the acts: they were acts of war, which galvanizes the Us versus Them scene in terms of an actual, violent, and recognizable struggle. This struggle is explicitly identified as one of good versus evil.

Over the course of the following week, the President gives speeches in various venues for various reasons, in most cases to small, specific audiences. Because they are not addressed to the American public at large, as were all of the other speeches we have considered, they are not of great concern here. These speeches often lauded acts of Americans in response to the acts of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and lauded Americans and America as a great nation and a great people, aligning them more or less vaguely with the Good. The values underlying the “war on terrorism” are in the background of these speeches, which generally contain little or no formulation of scene. This is not true, however, of the only address to the nation that the president made during this week: his “Radio Address to the Nation” on September 15<sup>th</sup>. This address fits in interestingly with the speeches discussed above in terms of its use of dramatic elements.

The speech opens by announcing, but not describing in any detail whatsoever, a “comprehensive assault on terrorism” (Bush 2001e). This is the first speech we have seen since September 11<sup>th</sup> that does not begin with a reference to the terrorist attacks. The initial element is still an act, but it is an act of the United States. This allows Bush to proceed immediately into giving a detailed account of the scene, namely the struggle against terrorism. Bush describes this struggle as “a different kind of conflict against a different kind of enemy” (ibid.) and in reference to this conflict defines the other

elements. Americans as agents are a great people, patient, and strong; the purpose of “eradicate[ing] the evil of terrorism” will be accomplished through the means of “a broad and sustained campaign” (ibid.). Thus the pattern of dramatic elements aligns this speech with crisis rhetoric, although the relative brevity and unimportance of the element of act suggests that perhaps the speech is leaning toward functioning as a more ritual form of rhetoric. Both of these genres provide insight into the role of the speech, but neither captures it fully. Rather, the speech can be placed on a continuum, somewhere between crisis and ritual rhetoric.

Bush’s next official address to the nation (also an address to a joint session of Congress), which he gave on September 20<sup>th</sup>, also occupies an interesting place on this continuum. Although this speech was clearly prompted by the crisis of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Bush opens by saying, “...in the normal course of events, presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the union. Tonight, no such report is needed; it has already been delivered by the American people” (Bush 2001f). The speech itself is commenting on how it should be received: *not* as a speech in response to a crisis, but as a speech that takes place “in the normal course of events,” like the State of the Union address. In addition to alluding to that ritual address, the words “state of the union” also usher in, indirectly, the element of scene. Bush asserts that the state of the union has been evidenced in the various acts of Americans, and comes to conclude that the state of the union is “strong” (ibid.). Then, having identified and described the scene within the nation, Bush broadens his scope, identifying the larger scene as the struggle “to defend freedom” (ibid.). This scene is reiterated and elaborated throughout the entire speech and provides the motivation for the other elements. At first, Bush implies that this scene is a



new one for the United States and the world; he says that September 11<sup>th</sup> marked the beginning of “a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack” (ibid.). However, after naming the enemy agent as al Qaeda and describing its purpose and agency, he claims that “[t]hey’re the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism” (ibid.). Thus he brings the current scene of international struggle in line with the overwhelming scene that has defined international struggle for the last hundred years.

Now, having recovered from the chaos of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the President’s rhetoric, in terms of the understanding of the world that it promotes, is virtually indistinguishable from the rhetoric of all of the other presidents we have seen since the cold war. Bush reemphasizes this continuity at the end of the speech, when he says, “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (ibid.). Clearly, the meta-narrative is now firmly in place: as always, We, the Good, are fighting Them, the Evil. In terms of the genres we have considered, this speech is most aptly described as ritual rhetoric. Although acts are discussed, they are defined in reference to the all-encompassing scene.

## **Conclusion**

By looking at these speeches through the lenses of genre, we gain insight into how the speeches influence and/or support a predominant interpretation of reality. But we also gain insight into the nature of presidential rhetoric as invariably following certain patterns. We have traced the development of the dramatic elements, especially act and scene, as they begin to fall into patterns after the chaos of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Thus the first

few speeches, which focus on acts, can be analyzed as embryonic crisis speeches that are faltering in searching for a way to define and give context to acts. This context gradually emerges as the later speeches come to propose a more and more coherent scene. The meta-narrative enters as the scene element becomes more prominent, and the speeches become more like other crisis speeches we have seen. In the radio address specifically, the act element has lost its potency, having been eclipsed by the scene. The act is still present, as we would expect in a crisis speech, but this genre has begun to lose its grip on the rhetoric. This movement away from crisis rhetoric is, in an important sense, complete in Bush's address to Congress on September 20<sup>th</sup>. This speech self-consciously posits itself as a ritual speech, and this identification is supported by the use of the scene element as the most potent and as a point of reference for the other elements. The scene is now the full-blown meta-narrative that has structured reality throughout past presidencies.

Whereas Bush's earlier speeches seek to *set up* the meta-narrative through which the events can be interpreted, the address to Congress is in the business of *supporting* that meta-narrative: it assumes it from the start and references it throughout, rather than presenting it. This progression can be understood in other terms: at first, the rhetoric is searching for a meta-narrative to subsume the acts and provide them with an interpretation. But the meta-narrative can be seen as gradually reversing this direction as it enters the rhetoric as an ever-present force searching for acts bring into its framework. The meta-narrative can be characterized as a general rhetorical atmosphere that manifests itself in the scene element of presidential speeches. In doing so, it interacts with the play between actual events in the world and the president's attempt to make sense of those

events. This multi-layered interaction is especially clear in Bush's speeches, because he interpreted the events gradually, as they were unfolding. And as his interpretation evolved and began to incorporate the concept of Good versus Evil, it restricted future events and actions. The course the government began to take in struggling against America's enemies came to seem natural and inevitable, whereas other courses of action (for example, doing nothing) became impossible.

Although September 11<sup>th</sup> was a unique circumstance through which to examine this process, it was clearly not the first time it has happened. For all of President Bush's assertions that "[t]his will be a different kind of conflict against a different kind of enemy" (Bush 2001e), he still ends up bringing the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> into the same framework that presidents before him used to interpret the events of their times. The name of the enemy has changed, but its place in the dominant paradigm remains the same. Indeed, Bush's rhetoric can be seen as just an intensification of the rhetoric of previous presidents; more so than others, Bush persistently and forcefully reiterates the Goodness of the US, the Evilness of the terrorists, and the importance of fighting them. Perhaps it is the case that the more traumatic a political rupture is, the more intense the meta-narrative becomes. It may or may not follow that this intensified meta-narrative has an increased potential to set the scene for further governmental actions and policies. But in investigating what effect it in fact comes to have on future reality, President Bush's rhetoric must be seen in light of past rhetoric; in many ways what Bush has said is nothing that we haven't heard before.

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