Fixing the Meaning of September 11:

Rhetorical Coercion and the Road to War in Iraq

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The occupation of Iraq has unquestionably been bungled and badly. Even many who supported the war initially (though not the administration itself) now openly admit as much, though many continue to hold out hope that, despite the missteps, the situation can be salvaged, stability returned, and perhaps even a democracy installed (Diamond 2005; Packer 2005; Pollack and Policy 2006). The consequences of this colossal blunder for US security are still much debated: critics charge that, among other things, the invasion and lingering conflict have alienated thousands of young Muslims in the West and across the Muslim world and thus revitalized the Islamist threat, distracted the US government from addressing more critical aspects of the “war on terror,” demoralized the Army and perhaps permanently hobbled the National Guard and Reserves, sacrificed political capital that could have been exploited to confront Iran and North Korea more effectively, estranged America’s allies, undermined the US claim to legitimate global leadership, and generally harmed the prospects for international cooperation in many areas of common concern.1

Given the potential direct and indirect costs of the 2003 Iraq War and the lingering postwar insurgency, understanding how the United States came to find itself at war with Iraq in the first place has not surprisingly risen to the top of the agenda among the George W. Bush administration’s many critics. Scholars have sought to offer more theoretically informed accounts of the road to war in Iraq and—as many opposed the war in prospect and nearly all in retrospect—to extract lessons for how the United States might avoid such a fate in the future. These accounts, both scholarly and popular, have emphasized the Bush administration’s willful and effective manipulation of classified information, US presidents’ capacity to speak with unquestioned authority with regard to foreign policy, internal and external pressures that led

1 For a skeptical view, however, arguing that the consequences of the invasion and the corresponding rise in anti-Americanism have, for the most part, been overblown, see Keohane and Katzenstein 2005.
intelligence agencies around the globe to misread and overstate the intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs and stocks, the uncritical stance of the mainstream media, the relative silence of the Democratic Party, and individuals’ reasoning errors with regard to risk.\footnote{See Cramer 2005; Freedman 2004; Kaufmann 2004; Mueller 2005; Western 2005a; Western 2005b. On democracy promotion, neoconservatism, and Iraq, see McCartney 2004; Monten 2005; Williams 2005.}

These accounts all contain far more than a grain of truth, yet it is not at all clear that they have fully captured the crucial forces driving the United States to war. First, these explanations are typically rooted in theoretical arguments that over-predict the success of presidents in dominating public debate. President George W. Bush did succeed in framing the national dialogue on September 11 and on Iraq, but this cannot be straightforwardly attributed to his institutional position. His success in this regard must be problematized. Second, and closely related, one critical question that lies at the heart of many of these arguments but has not been adequately explained by them is: why were the Democrats relatively silent? Why was the potential political opposition consigned to the margins? Any adequate answer to these questions must be situated theoretically in a framework that can account for the many rhetorical efforts to construct threats that have historically failed to gain traction and for the presence, or in this case absence, of a vocal opposition.

Existing accounts have difficulty answering these questions because they fail to take seriously the problem of legitimation. The argument advanced here proceeds in two steps. First, we maintain that the administration’s success in the run up to war in the spring of 2003 was made possible by its monopolistic control over the essential terms of debate in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The administration’s success in fixing the meaning of 9/11 in terms of a Manichaean struggle in the “war on terror” between the forces of good and evil created the conditions of possibility for its later rhetorical triumphs with regard to Iraq.
Second, this “discursive hegemony” so constrained the potential Democratic political opposition in the subsequent Iraq debates that leading figures who might have otherwise sought to resist the administration became the victims of “rhetorical coercion” and could contest the administration’s claims only at the margins. Since the beginnings of the first Gulf crisis in 1990, US leaders had characterized Saddam Hussein as a second Hitler; later, President Bill Clinton portrayed the Iraqi leader as a terrorist. This established portrait of Saddam Hussein, when combined with the hegemonic post–September 11 “war on terror” discourse, helps explain one of the enduring puzzles of the Iraq War debate: that is, why the vast majority of Americans were persuaded, on the basis of little evidence, that Saddam Hussein had a finger in the September 11 attacks, and why challenging the administration’s insinuations to that effect was so difficult.

Much mainstream academic debate has been characterized by a remarkable unreflectiveness about September 11. One year after the attacks, a diplomatic historian would write, in his field’s preeminent journal, that “no credible nation-state … could have decided not to go to war after September 11. Not to act would only have provoked further intolerable incidents. The Democrats, since they were not in power, were bloodthirsty, and so the GOP could not afford not to be bloodthirsty. But Republicans did not need much encouragement to act strongly” (Kuklick 2002, 565). We proceed rather from the presumption that September 11, like all political events, did not speak for itself. It required interpretation, and it mattered how it was publicly represented and whether and by whom those representations were contested. The implication of such a critical analysis is clear. The world we live in after September 11 was by no means inevitable, and alternative worlds could have emerged. “Geopolitical scripts,” as Simon Dalby notes, “might
have been otherwise” (Dalby 2004, 65). The attacks of September 11 were very real, but the insecurity they generated was necessarily a cultural production (Weldes et al. 1999).

Why then was the administration so successful in fixing the meaning of September 11? In the penultimate section, we advance an explanation that is grounded theoretically in the conjuncture of historical context, institutional position, and rhetorical mode. None of these three is alone sufficient to explain the outcome, yet all three are necessary (and perhaps jointly sufficient). Articulations must draw from existing discursive formations if they are to resonate with their audience: the Bush administration framed September 11 and the terrorist threat in the traditional binaries of US foreign policy discourse. Positionality matters as well, we maintain: the president enjoyed an advantage in the post-September 11 rhetorical competition by virtue of his position. Yet rhetorical mode was also critical, for Bush’s rhetoric imposed particularly high barriers to dissent. This was not a choice entirely of Bush’s making, however, for the September 11 attacks themselves called forth such rhetoric: historical context cannot be excluded from the narrative.

While this article has been motivated by an effort to grasp a single, puzzling, and unusually important historical case, it has a theoretical agenda as well: to delineate and theorize the processes by which discursive hegemony is established and the arbitrary thus made to seem natural. It seeks to lay out a theoretically grounded account of how particular sets of articulations succeed in dominating public debate in the face of competing articulations. Our account departs from both a strictly materialist position (in which meaning production is epiphenomenal) and a rigidly postmodern stance (in which meaning production is unconstrained). Equally important, we contend that the successful establishment of such hegemony has substantial consequences for subsequent political contestation and policy—in this case, making possible the war in Iraq.

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3 See also Der Derian 2002.
Existing Arguments and Their Flaws

The war in Iraq and especially the subsequent revelation that its chief justification—the alleged existence of active Iraqi research programs to develop and acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, and of sizable Iraqi chemical and biological weapons stocks in violation of past commitments—was mistaken has led to a scholarly “threat inflation” industry. These scholars assert that sufficient evidence was available prior to the onset of combat operations in March 2003 to have cast severe doubt on the administration’s most serious charges and that the American people supported the war effort only because the threat had been so exaggerated (Kaufmann 2004; Mueller 2005; Western 2005a). Yet these accounts are ultimately not satisfying, in part because they implicitly assume that, in the absence of evidence of threat inflation, attention need not have been paid to the administration’s and its opponents’ strategies of legitimation, actual and conceivable. This argument and other narrower critiques of the five existing accounts are developed below. An alternative, presented in the next section, places the (non-)debate over Iraq in a theoretical context that problematizes legitimation.

First, it has been rightly noted that presidents in the United States enjoy particular authority with regard to foreign affairs. Thanks to the deference historically accorded them, Congress’ regular abdication of its own responsibilities with regard to the deployment of military force, and the executive’s control over classified information, it is sometimes argued that presidents’ preferred frames can dominate public debate, particularly when it comes to foreign policy (Kaufmann 2004, 37-43; Western 2005b, 108-09, 17-20).4 President Bush effectively exploited his position in reframing the debate over Iraq from one that focused on the possibility of

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4 This view, however, underestimates the strength and consistency of public attitudes on foreign affairs. See Aldrich, et al. 1989; Zaller 1992.
containment to one that emphasized Saddam Hussein’s terrorist links and the prospect of an Iraqi-sponsored attack on the US homeland (Kaufmann 2004, 35-37).

The Bush administration’s preferred frame did dominate the public debate over Iraq, but attributing it to the president’s inherent authority with regard to foreign affairs overstates presidents’ power to lead public opinion—even on matters about which they care deeply and even with regard to international politics. The bully pulpit is far more limited than this stance suggests, and on a wide range of issues—including national security—presidents have not regularly shaped public opinion: they have served more as “facilitators” who reflect widely held views than as “directors” who lead opinion (Edwards III 2003). The rise of cable television in recent years has further undercut presidents’ abilities to control public debate (Baum and Kernell 1999). Presidents have many times faced substantial opposition and have been compelled to abandon pet projects abroad, both when they have sought to build support for threats and when they have sought to damp down anxiety (Widmaier 2005). The fact that leading Democrats in 2002-2003 (as well as during the 2004 presidential campaign) for the most part did not vocally oppose the war turns their relative silence into the central puzzle.

Second, and closely related, it is often suggested that the executive branch’s control over the intelligence community, combined with relatively limited congressional oversight, confers informational advantages that the executive can manipulate to its advantage (Kaufmann 2004, 37-41; Western 2005b, 108-09, 14-20, 26-27). John Mueller (2005, 228) has further argued that the public is generally irrational and uninformed and thus, in combination with these institutional

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5 See also Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Sobel 2001. For a dissenting view, see Cohen 1997.
6 Lawrence Freedman argues, however, that the problem lay less with political manipulation of intelligence than with intelligence oversimplified to boost agency influence and relevance (see also Betts 1978). To the extent that there was conscious manipulation, he maintains, the administration appears to have “hoodwinked” itself even more than it did the country (Freedman 2004, 39).
asymmetries, easily manipulated.\textsuperscript{7} That such manipulation of information occurred in the case of the Iraq War is, despite the Bush administration’s protestations, beyond much doubt, yet it is not clear that it was causally critical. If Chaim Kaufmann (2004) is right that there was more than enough information available in the public arena to demonstrate that Iraq was not an imminent threat, then the manipulation of intelligence cannot have had the effects he and others have ascribed to it. What becomes puzzling is why the administration’s misrepresentations and misleading statements carried the day over the widely available discrepant evidence, and that is, by Kaufmann’s account, the product of presidential authority, not manipulation.

Third, many have pointed to the mainstream media’s uncritical presentation of the administration’s claims—and its abdication of its professional obligation to speak truth to power—as contributing to the administration’s ability to dominate the public debate (Kaufmann 2004, 44-45; Western 2005b, 127-28).\textsuperscript{8} Yet this argument does not accord with the way in which scholars of media and politics generally think about the relationship between politics and the press. This research suggests that the mainstream media is \textit{generally} more dependent than independent, more mirror of official debates than active participant in them (Cohen 1963; Gans 1979; Sigal 1973). When the political opposition is vibrant, the press can be feisty, since it can take political cover. When the political opposition is itself relatively silent, the media will only occasionally present narratives that deviate from the official line.\textsuperscript{9} These dynamics are only exacerbated in times of war (Bennett 1994, 23; Jamieson and Waldman 2003, 12-22). Typically, the media “indexes” these high-profile debates, and criticism in official circles opens media

\textsuperscript{7} However, studies have shown that public opinion, despite individual ignorance on many matters, is collectively rational (Page and Shapiro 1992), and the operative mechanism appears to be elite cuing. Such dynamics certainly raise questions about the prospect for democratic deliberation, but the problem in this case was that the elites spoke largely with a single voice—highlighting once again to the relative silence of the Democrats.

\textsuperscript{8} This abdication has been well documented in Friel and Falk 2004; Jamieson and Waldman 2003, chapter 6; Massing 2004; Mermin 2004; Miller 2004.

\textsuperscript{9} Such alternative narratives are most likely early on, before the frame is well established. In the absence of official encouragement, however, they will soon disappear from the scene (Entman 2004).
space for coverage of criticism outside Washington; voices not represented in the official debate are, more or less, ignored or marginalized (Bennett 1990; Bennett 2004; Cook 1998; Hallin 1986; Mermin 1999). Even the introduction of new technologies that have facilitated more “event-driven” news has not diminished the prominence of officials in press stories (Livingston and Bennett 2003). To the extent that journalists do criticize, they do so within the terms of the Washington consensus, typically focusing on questions of implementation and outcome alone (Mermin 1999, 8-11). The media’s relatively uncritical presentation of the Bush administration’s case reflected the acquiescence of the Democrats, and it is their relative silence that most requires explanation.

Closely related, others have highlighted the role of right-wing media in silencing potentially opposed narratives, and there is certainly anecdotal evidence that the mainstream media and potential political opponents feared being tagged as unpatriotic by the right (Cramer 2005; Massing 2005a). But the rise of right-wing think tanks, television, and radio can be no more than a contributing factor. When those in government, including the legislative branch, have failed to contest administration policy, the mainstream media have historically followed suit; their failure to search out opponents of official policy cannot be attributed to these more recent developments. It is more plausible that right-wing television and radio silenced prominent Democrats, but this too is likely overstated. There is little evidence that media exposure much changes opinion, let alone voting behavior. Public opinion responds when the media speaks with a single voice, but in a highly polarized media environment, in which the media as a whole

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10 The reasons for indexing—and more broadly for the failure of the media to perform its function as a watchdog—include, among others: the efficiency (savings of time, money, and effort) of relying on official sources; the predictability and credibility of official sources; the interests of major news corporations; and the journalistic norm of “balance.” In cases regarding the use of force abroad, journalists’ concerns about appearing unpatriotic also foster subservience to official narratives. See, in addition to the sources listed above, Massing 2005a; Massing 2005b; McChesney 1999. For a critical view of “indexing,” see Althaus 2003.
present “two sides” to every issue, opinion polarizes as well, as people fall back on their predispositions (Zaller 1992). If people tend to watch multiple biased news programs, they will simply be reinforced in their views. There is, moreover, some (not overly strong) evidence that those who watch Fox News are disproportionately self-identified conservatives who are already in the Republican camp (Kohut et al. 2004). Either way, viewers’ and listeners’ votes were not typically up for grabs, and thus their capacity to punish Democrats at the polls was correspondingly limited. At best, they might have been more highly motivated to vote against war opponents or to volunteer on behalf of a pro-war challenger.

Fourth, John Mueller has observed that politicians (and by extension the media) tend to accede to representations of crisis and threat because there is greater “reputational danger” in underplaying risks than in exaggerating them: “disproved doomsayers can always claim that caution induced by their warnings prevented the predicted calamity from occurring. Disproved pollyannas have no such convenient refuge” (Mueller 2005, 226-27). This basic political calculus can explain the long history of threat representations among democratic politicians, and it can particularly account for the weakness of congressional opposition to war: if the war goes badly, the president will take the blame, and if the war goes well, they will at least have avoided censure for having opposed it. The problem here, however, is one of overprediction. The argument implies that moves toward war almost never meet with much resistance: such resistance, Mueller would argue, might arise only once the casualties start to stream in and mass opposition grows (Mueller 1973). Yet efforts to construct threats and a sense of crisis have hardly proved universally successful, even when it is the president who leads the charge.\(^1\) In fact, the list of failed recent presidential efforts to build support for particular threats abroad is

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\(^1\) Mueller has, in a personal communication (by email, 17 September 2005), admitted that this calculus cannot account for the many dogs that do not bark.
impressive: Reagan on Lebanon, El Salvador, Grenada, and especially Nicaragua; GHW Bush on Haiti; Clinton on Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. With regard to the 2003 Iraq War, some have attributed Democrats’ silence to their experience a decade before, when many opposed the first Gulf War, only to find themselves on the political short end of the stick when the US-led coalition won an overwhelming and nearly bloodless victory (at least for coalition forces). While this may have lingered in the minds of some Democrats, the larger lesson is that the public’s memory is short. President George H.W. Bush proved unable to capitalize domestically on his triumphs on the battlefield and in the realm of diplomacy, for he was defeated by Bill Clinton in the following year’s election. In fact, just five months after the first Gulf War concluded, most Americans were unable to remember what position most Democrats had in fact adopted on the war (Zaller 1994, 269).

Fifth, observers have drawn attention to the psychology of risk to explain why threat may be inflated relatively easily in general and how the Iraq threat in particular was made plausible. Human beings suffer from a general tendency to overestimate risks, particularly with regard to rare events over which they feel they have no control (Slovic 2000). This was exacerbated by the September 11 attacks, which led Americans to embrace worst-case analysis. Under such conditions, still far-off concerns (Iraq’s acquiring nuclear weapons) and low probability events (Iraq’s sharing such weapons with Al Qaeda) suddenly seemed more plausible (Freedman 2004, 16-17; Huddy et al. 2003; Mueller 2005, 227-28; Sunstein 2003). As decisions came to be made on the basis of possibility rather than probability, the Bush administration’s case for invading Iraq was correspondingly strengthened (Gambetta 2004; Krebs 2005, 200-01). While it is difficult to explain any single event based on the general human predilection for over-estimating risks, perhaps one emphasizing the effects of September 11 on public perceptions of risk is more
reasonable. However, a straightforward psychological account is simply not supported by the public opinion data. The American public was not overwhelmingly supportive of rushing into war with Iraq, and it generally resisted even the Bush administration’s stepped-up efforts in the fall of 2002. As late as the month before the war began, a clear majority of Americans believed the United States should not attack Iraq without UN support, suggesting that they understood that the threat was hardly imminent and that they distinguished, to some meaningful extent, between possibility and probability (Cramer 2005, 6-11; Kull et al. 2003-04).

In summary, the existing claims about “threat inflation” in Iraq are rooted in theoretical arguments that tend toward over-prediction, and many point back to a critical under-explained question: why were the Democrats silent? How was the political opposition effectively consigned to the margins? Any proper account of how the Iraq threat was successfully legitimated must be situated theoretically in a framework that can account for the many rhetorical efforts that have historically failed to gain traction. The very notion of threat inflation implies that how political actors frame circumstances is critical. Yet the causal mechanisms in existing accounts are distinctly non-rhetorical, focusing seemingly on everything but the language of legitimation: institutional position, material power resources, the psychology of risk. This ambivalence toward public rhetorical contestation appears to reflect these scholars’ materialist and/or subjectivist ontology.

All policies require legitimation,¹² and this process is inherently problematic in regimes with even a modicum of political contestation. Even “reasonable”—i.e. “unexaggerated”—threats face actual or at least conceivable arguments to the contrary, and thus there is always the

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¹² On the politics of legitimation, see Goddard 2006; Jackson 2006.
possibility that a political opposition will coalesce. Whatever the outcome, legitimation requires explanation.

To understand how the Iraq War was effectively “sold,” one must explore the legacy of the September 11 attacks on US political discourse. Too much debate over how the United States has come to find itself in Iraq devotes only passing attention to September 11. To the extent that it figures in such accounts, it does so as a political resource cynically deployed by the Bush administration to create the false impression that Saddam Hussein’s regime was somehow responsible for the attacks or at least operationally linked to al Qaeda and thus to make possible the pursuit of an agenda it (or at least prominent hawks in its ranks) had harbored all along (Freedman 2004, 18-20; Kaufmann 2004, 16-19, 46). Supporters of the Iraq War did disproportionately associate the Hussein regime with September 11 (Kull et al. 2003-04, 576-77), but this was made possible by the way in which September 11 and the subsequent global war on terror were represented. September 11—not the events themselves, but rather how they were construed—was of immense significance for the prewar debate over Iraq. These representations were barely contested after September 11, established themselves as near hegemonic, and thus soon came to seem natural. But they must be laid bare and de-naturalized if the road to war in Iraq is to be properly understood.

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13 We are, however, skeptical of such concepts as “threat inflation” or “threat exaggeration” because they imply that threats exist independent of the viability of their articulation, that there is some objective baseline from which we may measure deviations. Rather, we believe that the assertion of threat as well as the allegation of threat inflation are equally and inherently political interventions, even after the fact. For an opposed view, which views after-the-fact threat assessment as objective, see Kaufmann 2005, 204.

14 Others, however, argue that the attacks led the administration’s principal figures to rethink the nature of international threats in general, and specifically that posed by Iraq (Jervis 2003).
Narrating September 11, Legitimating the War on Terror

The conventional wisdom has been that September 11 “changed everything.” It revealed a world in which state power was severely attenuated and in which the threat of mass-casualty terrorism suddenly seemed very real. It ushered in a US foreign policy that was far more assertive (if not aggressive), militarized, and unilateral in tone and in substance. Viewed from the perspective of legitimation, however, radical newness is not sustainable. Universes of rhetorical commonplaces—the basic linguistic units out of which representations are constructed—are, in the short to medium run, relatively stable, though certainly transformations occur over the long run (Krebs and Jackson 2006).\textsuperscript{15} Faced with an event that demanded an interpretive response, US foreign policy elites—as well as the mass public that took its cues from them—unsurprisingly fell back on older tropes and narratives to make sense of this singular event.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, September 11 did not change everything, and it was this discursive continuity that imparted a power to the Bush administration’s efforts to impose meaning on these mute events. But foreign policy discourses are also sufficiently rich to make possible multiple framings, and indeed other interpretations of the attacks jostled in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the administration’s framing of September 11 established itself as hegemonic. This section seeks to answer three questions: What was the nature of that hegemonic narrative? What were the alternatives, and how were they marginalized? And why did the Bush administration’s preferred narrative come to dominate the public rhetoric surrounding September 11?

The nature of that hegemonic interpretation has been widely noted and need not be belabored. After some initial fumbling, the Bush administration found its rhetorical footing.

\textsuperscript{15} See also Jackson 2006; Shotter 1993.
\textsuperscript{16} Many historians have noted that neither the Bush administration’s disdain for international institutions, nor its promotion of democracy, nor even its “vindicationist” approach to that end were particularly new. See, among others, Bacevich 2005; Kennedy 2005; Leffler 2004, 22-24; McCartney 2004; Monten 2005.
Within days of September 11, President Bush and his advisers consistently portrayed the attacks as the latest stage in a terrorist “war” on “America” and its “values.” Deploying a series of binaries, they contrasted the goodness and virtue of America with the “evil” of her terrorist adversaries, the freedom that Americans prized with the despotism that her enemies represented. The attacks themselves were the product of the evil natures of Al Qaeda and its fellow travelers, personified in the vilified figure of Osama Bin Laden, and of their ideology’s innate antipathy toward American values. As President Bush put it, two days after the attacks:

Civilized people around the world denounce the evildoers who devised and executed these terrible attacks. Justice demands that those who helped or harbored the terrorists be punished—and punished severely. The enormity of their evil demands it. We will use all the resources of the United States and our cooperating friends and allies to pursue those responsible for this evil, until justice is done.

In February 2002 Bush was even more blunt: “[The war against terror is] as simple as that. It's good versus evil, and freedom is under attack.” Such “evil” cannot be negotiated or reasoned with; violence must be met with violence; and a “war on terror” was proclaimed.

The United States was thus cast in the role of victim, utterly blameless for the perpetrated outrage: the horrific attacks were in no way a response to its deeds and misdeeds abroad. This claim was central to several strands of argument, not all of which easily comported with the administration’s framing. Most closely related, some depicted September 11 as part of the backlash against globalization, directed against those who epitomized the liberal order: the anti-Americanism that pervades the Arab and Muslim world is implied to be as illegitimate and groundless as was European anti-Semitism a century earlier (Mousseau 2002/03). Others emphasized that such anti-Americanism reflected frustration with the lack of responsive

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governments at home (Ajami 2001). Still others suggested that the real cause of September 11 was the larger civil war being waged over Arab and Muslim identity, and the attacks were designed to provoke an overreaction from the United States and thus further the goal of Islamic revolution (Doran 2001). At the core of these seemingly contending accounts lies the same key narrative element: “we” were attacked because of “who we are,” not because of “what we have done.”

Attacks on the nation-state tend to call forth a rhetorical mode that seeks to make sense of these shocking events, to reaffirm the nation’s ideals, and to reassure the public that security will be restored. The rhetoric of crisis is consequently the rhetoric of identity, providing the occasion for re-narrations of national self-conceptions. The Bush administration thus expended its rhetorical energies primarily on articulating a vision of America and of the values it holds dear. In a classic binary fashion not at all surprising to students of foreign policy discourse in the United States and elsewhere, it portrayed America’s adversaries as the country’s antithesis: evil (rather than good), despotic (rather than free), forces of instability (rather than stability) (Brands 1999; Campbell 1998; McDougall 1997; Wander 1984). Even the more liberal Bill Clinton had sounded a similar note after the 1998 bombings on US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya: the perpetrators, he averred, “have made the United States their adversary precisely because of what we stand for and what we stand against… This will be a long, ongoing struggle between freedom and fanaticism, between the rule of law and terrorism…. America is and will remain a target of terrorists precisely because we are leaders; because we act to advance peace, democracy and

19 This is what Aristotle called epideictic (or demonstrative) rhetoric. After September 11 President Bush and other officials spoke largely epideictically, perhaps even to a relatively unusual extent. See Bligh, et al. 2004; Bostdorff 2003; Murphy 2003. For brief useful discussions of the Aristotelian genres, see the entries on deliberative, epideictic, forensic, and hybrid genres in Sloane 2001.
basic human values.”20 As George W. Bush embraced this rhetoric, so distant from the narrowly
crafted realpolitik on which he had run in 2000, he elided the differences between himself and
his predecessor: “Clinton’s ‘indispensable nation’ became Bush’s ‘unique role.’ Clinton’s
commitment to ‘democratic engagement and enlargement’ became Bush’s pledge to ‘the spread
of freedom’” (Judis 2005, 59).

This framing of September 11 became dominant, and alternatives received relatively little
play. In reportage, national identity discourse—including the invocation of core American values
and the demonization of the enemy—overshadowed all other framings in the weeks after
September 11 (Coe et al. 2004; Hutcheson et al. 2004). The Bush administration’s political
opponents, who prior to September 11 had exulted in its missteps over China and in the domestic
arena, rallied behind not only the president’s policies, but also his rhetorical mode. From
September 11 to well into 2002, “there was barely a peep” in Congress, as “everyone along
Pennsylvania Avenue [marched] seemingly in lockstep agreement with administration policy.
Patriotism dominated the scene, with the president leading the red-white-and-blue parade and the
Democrats following his lead, rarely raising any questions suggesting a difference of opinion”
(Hess and Kalb 2003, 237). “Save for a few criticisms of [Bush’s] offhand remarks about a
‘crusade’ and wanting Osama bin Laden ‘dead or alive,’” one scholar observes, “no significant
domestic public criticism of his discourse about evil was voiced” (Bostdorff 2003, 293). In short,
after September 11, Americans were witness to a key mechanism by which American national
identity is reproduced and to the emergence of an ascendant foreign policy discourse.

The most prominent alternative suggested the opposite: “we” were attacked because of “what
we have done.” And of what was the United States accused? It had financially and politically
assisted repressive regimes across the Arab and Muslim world. It had given Israel unquestioned

20 Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan, 20 August 1998, _PPP_.

political support and implicitly sanctioned its occupation of Palestinian territory. It had, by working to spread neoliberal economic policies, threatened traditional ways of life, disrupted local economies, generated economic dependency, and promoted a race to the environmental bottom. The immediate turn to a militarized response, to a “war on terrorism,” highlighted the corruption at the heart of the US capitalist regime and its inexorable impulse for imperialist expansion. In September 11 the United States merely reaped what it had sowed.

These various voices, mostly but not exclusively from the Left, advanced not simply a litany of US misdeeds, but a far less flattering portrait of America as a nation. Conforming to the demands for identity rhetoric, they suggested that America had been attacked not only because of “what we have done,” but also because of what these policies revealed about “who we are.” The September 11 attacks were represented as a wake-up call, as an all-too-concrete exhortation urging Americans to change their ways of acting in the world. This alternative did not contest the Bush administration’s portrait of American values, but it questioned whether Americans had lived up to those aspirations or had been undone by weakness or even hypocrisy. Whereas the Bush administration represented the Self as good and as victim and the Other as lying outside US borders, the alternative suggested that, in a sense, the enemy lay within, in Americans’ own failings as a people and as individuals. In the immortal words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” This narrative sufficiently penetrated the debate that many felt compelled to respond to its claims, but it gained little assent beyond the true believers on the Left.

That the Bush administration’s preferred framing of September 11 would become hegemonic cannot be attributed simply to the rhetorical power of the presidency. A more complete answer,

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21 For such arguments, see Barsamian 2001; Scraton 2002; Vanden Heuvel 2002.
22 From the religious Right, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson paralleled this rhetoric in blaming September 11 on corruption at home: Americans’ embrace of a godless life and sexual deviance. For them as well, Americans were suffering because of what they had done and because of who they were.
we suggest, would focus on two elements. First, both the administration and its opponents rooted their interpretations of September 11 in older rhetorical forms. Both, invoking the language of evil, also partook of the religious overtones of US political discourse. But how Americans have talked about evil and its place in history has changed in important ways that contributed to the Bush administration’s success and to the opposition’s marginalization. Second, national leaders do have unusual rhetorical power at times, but not for the reasons typically identified. Rhetorical claims wrapped in a pragmatic (deliberative) or legal (forensic) rhetoric are more contestable in principle than are those offered in the epideictic mode described earlier. The attacks on September 11 called for the latter mode, placing Bush’s preferred interpretation in an unassailable rhetorical position.

*Foreign Policy in the Garden of Good and Evil*

The Bush administration’s rhetoric after September 11 embraced a long tradition of “prophetic dualism” in US foreign policy discourse. As Philip Wander summarizes it, prophetic dualism “divides the world into two camps… Conflict between them is resolved only through the total victory of one side over another. Since no guarantee exists that good will triumph, there is no middle ground. Hence neutrality may be treated as a delusion, compromise appeasement, and negotiation a call for surrender” (Wander 1984, 342). When “prophetic dualism” is dominant, debate occupies a narrow space focusing on whether the national mission is best fulfilled by the United States serving as an unsullied exemplar or by it getting its hands dirty (Judis 2005; 23 On the good/evil binary in US foreign policy discourse, see Brands 1999, 247-49; Campbell and Jamieson 1990, chap. 6. This may in fact be a near-universal feature of the “call to arms,” and observers noted that this framing was central to Osama Bin Laden’s rhetoric as well: see Graham, et al. 2004; Lincoln 2003, chap. 2.
McCartney 2004). In this rhetorical tradition, evil takes the shape of the “alien invader” coming from outside the nation’s borders (Delbanco 1995).

The notion of an always ongoing war between good and evil is, Walter Lippmann observed, “one of the great American superstitions” (Lippmann 1962, 7), and it had been applied to terrorism, domestic and international, well before September 11. After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Bill Clinton characterized the adversary as a force which “just as surely as fascism and communism, would spread darkness over light, disintegration over integration, chaos over community.” And, after September 11, even UN Secretary General Kofi Annan declared, with regard to terrorism, that “we are in a moral struggle to fight an evil that is anathema to all faiths.” The language of evil has been ubiquitous in Bush’s speech; between September 2001 and February 2006, no less than 381 of Bush’s speeches employed the language of “evil.” As the ethicist Peter Singer has observed, Bush has been “America’s most prominent moralist. No other president in living memory has spoken so often about good and evil, right and wrong” (Singer 2004, 1-2). President Bush and like-minded journalists reinforced this image of the terrorist as evil-doer by explicitly comparing Osama Bin Laden to Hitler—the rhetorical exemplar of evil in the twentieth century—and by characterizing the former’s agenda as “Islamo-fascism,” thus further implying parallels between Nazi Germany and Al Qaeda (Noon 2004, 352-53).

What does identifying an act or an actor as “evil” suggest? Evil, particularly when used as a noun, implies a force that operates almost independent of human agents. It is to be sensed, but

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24 However, the Bush administration has not suggested that this struggle will resolve itself in a single epic battle. Just the opposite, as the struggle is expected to persist almost indefinitely in “the long war.”
25 Remarks at the University of Connecticut, 15 October 1995, and Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address, 23 April 1995, PPP.
27 Based on a search of the Public Papers of the President, available from http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws.
not fully grasped or understood. As Lance Morrow puts it, “Evil prowls at the margins of our rationality.” Some speak of “structural” evil—that is, evil acts that can be traced back to psychological or situational causes (Rediehs 2002, 65-67). But such structural evil hardly seems to deserve the name, for evil is then merely a servant of larger forces. A “malignant mastery,” evil does not follow orders, it issues them (Morrow 2003, 110-11, 37). In a Christian political culture which sees itself as uniquely blessed by God, it is hardly surprising that the villains of the moment would be portrayed as the personification of evil and of Satan’s meddling in the world. In this tradition, one may not reason or negotiate with evil. One may not tolerate its presence, nor may one reconcile oneself to it. One cannot be content to contend with Satan’s representatives, as Jacob did with the angel. One may only seek to eradicate evil in a potentially apocalyptic struggle. The power of Bush’s post-September 11 rhetoric derived in part from the way in which it effectively tapped into this tradition.

Bush’s rhetoric employing moralistic binaries seemingly departed from a more recent reticence about labeling events, acts, and people evil. In the late 1970s, Susan Sontag suggested that contemporary Americans had lost “the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil” (Sontag 1978, 85). By the 1990s, evil seemed a relic of bygone days—not a philosophical conundrum to be confronted, or a force to be feared, but something to be

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28 A similar problem lies at the heart of the notion of the “banality of evil” (Arendt 1963), for the subjection of evil to modern bureaucratic rationality deprives evil of its majesty and mystery. Elsewhere Arendt appears to have acknowledged that her claim applies less to the nature of evil than to the nature of the man, Adolf Eichmann, who committed it. Eichmann was banal. Evil is not, nor were Nazism and its racist ideology (Miller 1998).

29 Americans have thus been obsessed with “naming the Antichrist,” which they have associated with various countries, historical figures, communal groups, and even technologies. See Fuller 1995; McGinn 1994.

30 Although Bush sought to downplay the explicitly religious or civilizational aspects of the conflict after September 11, his speeches were replete with biblical allusions that served to invest the political with transcendent meaning and to transform political adversaries into enemies of God. On religious themes in Bush’s rhetoric, see Broadway 2001; Domke 2004; Lincoln 2003, 29-32; Singer 2004.

31 President Ronald Reagan, however, did not shy away from such language: he notoriously publicly characterized the Soviet Union as “evil” in a 1982 speech to the British House of Commons and more famously as an “evil empire” the following year in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet the responses were also revealing. Reagan was not widely hailed for his moral bravery but was generally disparaged for having adopted an extreme stance that made it more difficult to negotiate an arms control deal with the Soviet Union.
spoofed, as in the absurd figure of “Dr. Evil” of the Austin Powers movies (Morrow 2003, 11-12). An insightful observer of contemporary America went so far, in the mid-1990s, as to proclaim “the death of Satan” in an American culture dominated by secular rationality. “The old religious metaphors,” Andrew Delbanco acknowledged, “are not entirely gone…. But by and large they have been reduced to mere speech tics” (Delbanco 1995, 11, 229).32 Roger Shattuck even charged that a certain tolerance of and even respect for metaphysical evil was the twentieth century’s true, and unfortunate, legacy (Shattuck 1999).

However, the response to September 11, and particularly the way in which Bush’s rhetoric so clearly resonated across the political spectrum, suggests that these observers, often ensconced in ivory towers, had misjudged how far talk of evil had been driven underground, if at all. Evil may have receded from elite American discourse, but it has over the past century become firmly rooted in popular American culture. In the 19th century, after the Second Great Awakening, Americans turned away from millenialist thought: they eschewed apocalyptic rhetoric and focused instead on social reform, on perfecting the earth in anticipation of the Second Coming. But the growing threat of secular humanism led in the early 1920s to a new coalition of premillenial fundamentalist Protestants who embraced a “supernaturalist” view of history: history does not simply unfold, but follows the course of a divine providential play culminating in the dramatic reversal of events that is the apocalypse.33 Thus they have sought to identify historical moments as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and to identify historical actors with key figures in the apocalypse narrative (Fuller 1995; McGinn 1994).

Evangelical Christians are hardly small in number—over half of all Protestants, and thus some 30 percent of all Americans, characterize themselves as evangelicals, making this the

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32 See also Baudrillard 1993.
33 On the nature of fundamentalism, see Marty and Appleby 1991-1995; and, for a good overview of the fundamentalist view of history, see Appleby 2002.
largest single religious category\textsuperscript{34}—but even more impressive has been the larger cultural impact beyond the community of self-identified evangelicals. Christian eschatology has been popularized, most notably in the best-selling \textit{Left Behind} book series. In the early 1990s, over half of all Americans reported that they expected the imminent return of Jesus, accompanied by the fulfillment of biblical prophecies concerning the destruction of the wicked, and nearly 60 percent of Americans have more recently declared that they believe the events described in the Book of Revelation will occur at some point in the future.\textsuperscript{35} Increasing numbers of Americans, including apparently President George W. Bush, share the apocalyptic worldview (Wieseltier 2003). Andrew Delbanco need not have been so concerned: Satan was and is alive and well in American popular discourse. Public opinion surveys have since the 1990s routinely found that anywhere between 60% and often 75% of Americans “believe in” the devil or Satan.\textsuperscript{36} To Americans steeped in evangelical Christianity, September 11 seemed an obviously critical moment in Satan’s “never-ending war against the people of God” (Fuller 1995, 5). Bush’s identification of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks as evil—and even more that there was an evil force lurking all around—resonated with an American public increasingly drawn, if not always fully consciously, into the orbit of fundamentalist discourse.\textsuperscript{37}

Bush’s framing of September 11 thus drew upon a deeply rooted strain in US political culture that had only been reinforced by the spread of fundamentalist Christianity. It enjoyed a further rhetorical advantage in that it appeared to compel opponents to do the unthinkable: support the

\textsuperscript{34} It is also worth noting a partisan gap that has opened up in the last 15 years: twice as many white evangelicals now identify as Republicans than as Democrats. See Kohut, et al. 2003, 65-68.


\textsuperscript{37} There are distinct parallels between the apocalyptic worldview and what the historian Richard Hofstadter has called the “paranoid style in American politics” (Hofstadter 1963).
war on terror or make common cause with evil. Prophetic dualism has thus often served to squash dissent, which is one reason policymakers have found it attractive (Wander 1984, 344-45). It is also psychically rewarding: to name another as evil is to hail oneself as essentially good, and thus this rhetorical mode inhibits introspection.\(^{38}\) Evil may deserve a place in our modern political and ethical lexicon, but, as Delbanco has rightly warned, the danger is that we then embrace an “un-self critical jingoism” and fall “victim to … the ‘seductions of the devil’” (Frontline 2002). Sadly, such seductions appear to go with the rhetorical territory.

*Jeremiah and the Devil Within*

This straightforward account is complicated by an opposition rhetoric that also identified villain and victim and was equally well grounded in the millennialism that had long suffused US foreign policy discourse. This rhetoric also saw evil at work in the day’s events, but this evil lurked as much within as without. If a war on evil was to be waged, it had to be directed within one’s own soul and community. In its more overtly religious form, the rhetoric suggested that those who attacked the community were doing God’s will, punishing it for its collective transgressions. Americans after September 11 were thus to inquire whether they had somehow brought the tragedy upon themselves through their own folly and greed. Rather than pursue a war on terror, Americans should combine defensive measures with policy changes that would address the attacks’ fundamental causes.

In such talk lay yet another rhetorical genre with roots in the American past: the jeremiad. Like the haranguing biblical prophet from which it took its name, the jeremiad calls on the audience to repent and thus avoid punishment. In colonial New England, the jeremiad reinforced

\(^{38}\) This tendency was reinforced by the US media’s framing of the September 11 attacks around themes of trauma and mourning (Breithaupt 2003, 69-70).
communal norms as it urged the expurgation of the devil within (Bercovitch 1978). By the late 17th century, however, as second- and third-generation Puritans’ devotion to the church and the New England mission waned, ministers were abandoning the jeremiad in favor of a rhetoric of “covenant renewal” that depicted a gentler God, downplayed election as the path to salvation, focused increasingly on external enemies (“the forces of evil outside the garden”), portrayed crises as tests of faith rather than as signs of failure, and thus absolved the younger generations of blame for the difficulties they faced. Yet the jeremiad did not disappear, particularly in a more secular form: its elements and structure have been identified in various genres and substantive discourses from the Puritan era through the present. Ronald Reagan in fact rose to national prominence in the 1970s by adopting the rhetoric of the secular jeremiad (Aune 2001, 123-26). When (especially left-wing) critics of the Bush administration suggested that the attacks of September 11 represented “blowback,” they were advancing an interpretation that might have been expected to resonate. The administration’s Manichaean framing of September 11 did not, therefore, come to dominate because it was better rooted in America’s rhetorical traditions: the jeremiad could make as plausible a claim to authenticity.

Rhetors who employ the jeremiad genre face an uphill battle. Its style is at odds with basic psychological tendencies, such as the “fundamental attribution error,” which suggests that people explain their own less-savory actions situationally and those of others dispositionally. This genre also walks a fine line between upholding the status quo and advocating change. The jeremiad reinforces communal values, even as it upbraids the audience for violating them, and thus it reproduces the dominant discourse. But the jeremiad also calls for at least limited reform (Murphy 1990), and even narrower behavioral change, which leaves the social order intact, is

39 On the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre, see also Carpenter 1978; Murphy 1990.
40 On the rhetoric of covenant renewal, see Bostdorff 2003, quote at 295.
comparatively rare, given the hard-wired human need for stability in belief structures. The Bush administration’s interpretation of September 11 thus enjoyed several advantages: it was in accord with a positive national self-image, it attributed the terrorist attacks to Al Qaeda’s debased nature, and it required no substantial policy reversals, just an intensification of the Clinton administration’s already militarized struggle against Islamist terrorism.

Yet there is also reason to think that the jeremiad should enjoy its greatest efficacy in times of crisis. Schemas change only infrequently, but they are most likely to change under duress: when discrepant information is strong and salient, when it presents itself en masse, and when the costs of maintaining the existing belief system come to seem excessive (Jervis 1976). The post-September 11 left-wing jeremiad did not call for a complete rethinking of American identity, but for greater adherence to traditional American values. It demanded radical policy change, not mere incremental innovation, but it did not challenge the terms of the dominant discourse. Crisis would appear to be among the conditions of possibility for such change. It was precisely the scale of the September 11 attacks that might counterfactually have underpinned the jeremiad’s success. It does not seem plausible that simply “the enormity of the civilian loss of life” doomed the leftist jeremiad (Bostdorff 2003, 298).

**Explanation: Crisis, Rhetorical Mode, and Institutional Position**

The puzzle thus remains: why did these protestations on the Left not gain traction? Why did no national politician of note depart in substantial ways from the Bush administration’s framing? The answer, we suggest, lies in the conjunction of the strategic context (crisis), the rhetorical mode which it demands (epideictic), and the national leader’s institutional power in that mode. The mode in which a speaker proceeds is, at least in part, a product of the situation that he

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41 For a related argument that stark policy failure is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for ideational change, see Legro 2005.
confronts. Nothing compelled President Bush to represent the events of September 11 as he did, but he could not have remained silent in the face of an attack on the homeland. What was needed was a rhetoric that would make sense of these shocking events to a public whose narrative of national invulnerability had withstood even the perils of the nuclear age. Such a rhetoric would identify the perpetrators, explain what they wanted, and reaffirm the nation’s ideals (Condit 1985). It would only secondarily seek to articulate a rational policy response (Cherwitz and Zagacki 1986; Dow 1989).

In short, the attacks called first and foremost for rhetoric in the epideictic mode. Aristotle suggested that such rhetoric was marked by themes of praise and blame and that it often served a crucial political/pedagogical function, helping to maintain an orderly society with well defined social roles (Aristotle 1991, 104-10). But, as Celeste Condit observes, all speeches contain such themes, and the primary function of epideictic rhetoric is instead “to explain a social world,” to make sense of some “confusing or troubling” event, person, or object “in terms of the audience’s key values and beliefs” (Condit 1985, 288). In the wake of September 11, the rhetoric of President Bush and other officials was arguably unusually epideictic, defining for their American audience who the dramatis personae were in this play (villain, victim), what their chief characteristics were (tyrannical, fascistic, evil; free, tolerant, good), and what motivated the murderous action (hatred) and the response (righteousness). Relatively little attention was paid, in representing the war on terror, to considerations of pragmatism or justice (Murphy 2003). The opposed view, rhetorically structured as a jeremiad, was equally epideictic, advancing an

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42 The selected frame might also be the product of the speaker’s purpose, the speaker’s nature or characteristics, and the message’s form or medium (Benoit 2000). It is an empirical question whether and when one factor dominates, but it is not implausible that situation might be particularly important in the circumstances we have in mind: physical attacks on the homeland, epitomized by September 11. On “situation” and generic analysis, see Jamieson 1973; Jamieson and Campbell 1982; Miller 1984.
alternative narrative, with different characters filling the roles and with different understandings of their chief characteristics and motivations.

The rhetorical mode shapes the opportunity structure confronting a potential opposition. When argument proceeds deliberatively, opponents might seek to undermine a particular policy with superior evidence or logic. When argument proceeds epideictically, refutation of the speaker’s defining frame would accentuate division and disagreement, countering epideictic rhetoric’s mission to unify the community. Such challenge is beyond the pale: “when speakers violate this rule and make arguments which do not gain general assent, audience members feel a sense of misuse of the occasion” (Condit 1985, 289). The media swiftly framed the September 11 attacks as a national trauma, requiring comfort, reassurance, and communality (Breithaupt 2003, 77): those very features that epideictic rhetoric is uniquely suited to provide. The result was “a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information” (Schudson 2002, 41).43 The rhetorical demands of the situation prevented Democrats from articulating a coherent hegemonic project of their own with which to counter the Bush administration’s newfound sense of purpose. They were left to present a slate of policy proposals that lacked integration, even as they conceded critical ground to their opponents.

When, during times of crisis, national leaders speak in the epideictic mode, the obstacles facing potential dissenters are even more imposing. “There is but one national voice in the country,” wrote Woodrow Wilson, “and that is the voice of the President.” National leaders have the capacity to speak for and constitute the nation (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 5-6, quote at 13). To challenge that leader’s epideictic claims is implicitly to undermine that function and thus to challenge his very authority. It is, even more dauntingly, to interpellate oneself into the role of

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43 This was also reflected in a public sentiment that decried even the appearance of partisanship (Corn 2002, 47-49).
president—a tall order indeed and one that few politicians can successfully pull off. Senator Robert F. Kennedy was unusual in challenging President Lyndon B. Johnson in epideictic terms in 1968 over Vietnam. But Bobby Kennedy is the exception that proves the rule, since he could capitalize on the memory of his fallen brother and suggest himself as the rightful heir to Camelot. The alternative—to challenge such policies, framed epideictically, on deliberative grounds—is doomed to failure because such rhetoric leaves the epideictic groundwork untouched (Murphy 1992). After the attacks of September 11, figures on the Left couched their arguments equally in epideictic terms, but it is revealing that their challenge was not picked up by prominent national politicians. The latter toed the president’s line, accepting his essential framing of September 11 and the “justification” for the war on terror. Their silence would prove fateful, for the reproduction of prophetic dualism set the stage for the Iraq War.

National leaders often fail to move audiences, and the logic of rhetorical modes suggests why and when that occurs. Crises that present themselves require an epideictic response, but they are unusual. More commonly, leaders seek to persuade their populations that a given situation does in fact constitute a crisis. In constructing crisis, leaders tend to rely more heavily on pragmatic justifications (i.e. deliberative rhetoric) (Dow 1989), and political opponents can then safely criticize factual and logical claims without seemingly overstepping. This hypothesis helps explain why US presidents have often failed to effectively mobilize the public around threats that were not yet manifest. Moreover, epideictic rhetoric cannot sustain policy over the long haul. Eventually, that policy must be defended on deliberative grounds, and deliberation allows for, and implicitly treasures, dissent. National leaders may still often get their way—perhaps because

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44 This is, therefore, an alternative explanation for the oft-noted congressional deference to presidents in times of crisis. On congressional deference, see Hinckley 1994.
of the informational and media advantages their position bequeaths, as others have argued—but, at least in principle, their pragmatic justifications may be countered.

The preceding analysis has suggested how the meaning of September 11 was effectively fixed, yet it would also appear to suggest that the Bush administration’s arguments regarding Iraq could, at least in principle, have faced substantial opposition. The administration did go to great lengths to frame Iraq as a crisis, a “gathering storm,” and it argued primarily in a deliberative mode. It maintained that Iraq either had acquired or would soon acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, that such a development would spark intolerable instability in a region of strategic significance, and that Iraq might share such a device with terrorists who would attack the United States directly and could not be deterred. Why did leading Democrats pass up this opportunity to challenge the president? We argue that the post-September 11 rhetorical environment narrowed the space for subsequent debate over foreign policy and led Democrats to hold their tongues. One consequence of epideictic rhetoric is that it creates the foundation for later successful deliberative argumentation (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). President Bush’s success in setting the terms of debate after September 11 had repercussions that extended well beyond those first months after the World Trade Center fell.

**Extending the War on Terror: Iraq, 2002-2003**

As war with Iraq approached, opponents of the Bush administration found themselves at a severe disadvantage. Challenging the war required challenging a portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, a task made particularly daunting by representations of the Iraqi president dating back to the first Gulf War. Democrats consequently lacked access to socially sustainable alternative arguments that would have permitted vocal opposition: they were “rhetorically
coerced.”

Many Democrats voted against Joint Resolution 114, authorizing the use of armed force against Iraq, but those with national profiles generally jumped enthusiastically on the war bandwagon, quietly favored invasion, or at most criticized unilateral action while otherwise supporting an aggressive posture. Countering the president’s clarion call was seen by nearly all prominent Democrats as tantamount to political suicide.

Some conservatives began calling for the invasion of Iraq immediately after the September 11 attacks, but the president’s own rhetoric regarding Iraq was notably restrained until his 2002 State of the Union address. Following that speech, in which Bush famously characterized Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as comprising an “axis of evil,” the president’s depiction of Saddam Hussein and his regime remained remarkably consistent. The Iraqi president supported terrorism, sought and possessed weapons of mass destruction, killed and tortured “his own people,” and could not be trusted. As Bush put it in the State of the Union address:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

In the months that followed, President Bush and other leading administration figures repeated and reinforced this portrait of Iraq and its regime. In October 2002, as the administration launched an aggressive campaign for public opinion, three additional elements were grafted on to

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45 On rhetorical coercion, see Krebs 2006; Krebs and Jackson 2006.
46 Within two weeks of the attacks, William Safire announced in his column that “a clear link” had been established between Osama bin Laden and “the America-hater,” Saddam Hussein (Safire 2001).
47 This conclusion is based on a careful reading of every presidential address related to Iraq between September 2001 and March 2003, located in *PPP*.
the basic narrative. First, previously tolerable risks with regard to Iraqi weapons programs were no longer tolerable in the wake of September 11, which had brought war to the homeland for the first time since Pearl Harbor. Second, Iraq was a “grave and growing” danger. Third, Saddam Hussein hated America and its values. Through the start of major combat operations in March 2003, the administration did not waver from these core arguments.\footnote{See George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Iraq, 17 March 2003, \textit{PPP}.}

Many have noted how administration figures slyly mentioned Iraq in the same breath as the September 11 attacks, thus implying an operational link with Al Qaeda where there was none (Freedman 2004, 18-20; Kaufmann 2004, 16-19), but the administration’s rhetoric, widely reflected in media coverage, forged more durable bonds between the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein, and the war on terror.\footnote{The articulation of Iraq to the “global war on terror” was also regularly reinforced by the media, which did not challenge this link in any sustained way (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005).} By regularly referring to Iraq as a member of the “axis of evil” and portraying Saddam Hussein as “evil,” President Bush and other key administration spokespeople suggested that the Iraqi regime and its president were at least on the same moral plane as the terrorists and probably were themselves terrorists.\footnote{Of the speeches included in Bush’s presidential papers, 135 suggest that the Iraqi regime or Saddam Hussein was “evil.”} By emphasizing that the Iraqi regime killed its own civilians, the administration cleverly elided any distinction between the state terror in which Iraq had engaged and the international terrorism to which the United States had been subjected on September 11. By maintaining that the Iraqi regime had “something to hide from the civilized world,” President Bush placed it in the realm of barbarism, where Al Qaeda prominently resided. By emphasizing Saddam Hussein’s unyielding hatred of the United States and its values, Bush and others suggested a common agenda with Islamist terrorists. By continuously focusing on Saddam Hussein, rather than on Iraq or even its regime, Bush suggested a further parallel with Osama Bin Laden; their organizations merely reflected their
leaders’ political programs and personal pathologies, in contrast to democracies in which law, not personal whim, ruled. The link between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda was established not just through the blunt tactics of misrepresentation and exaggeration that have been widely noted, but perhaps more through these subtle rhetorical deployments that capitalized on the relatively settled discourse surrounding the meaning of September 11 and the war on terror.

Part of the reason for the Bush administration’s success in articulating a link between Iraq and the war on terror lies in the very nature of discourse on terrorism, which had acquired a newly central place after the attacks of September 11. Terrorism threatens the very logic of inside/outside that sustains the modern nation-state, and states consequently respond by asserting anew their territorial identity (reflected in policies of tightening borders and clamping down on domestic threats), reimposing a geopolitics of identity and difference and creating an alien Other, and emphasizing the primacy of territorial defense (Coleman 2004, 88-93). As Americans daily reproduced this statist counterterrorist discourse, their representations reinforced the comparatively reassuring vision of a statist world. In this context, the Bush administration’s insinuations of close links between Al Qaeda and a state sponsor seemed natural. While it is true that not any state could have been reasonably inserted into that role, Iraq was a prime candidate, largely because it had already been well established in US political discourse that Saddam Hussein and his regime were demonstrably evil and terroristic.

The rhetorical treatment of Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the decade since the Gulf War is critical to understanding why the essential terms of the administration’s frame went uncontested by leading Democrats. As early as October 1990, President George H. W. Bush described Saddam Hussein as “Hitler revisited,” and he regularly suggested that Hussein was as terrible a

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53 See also Keohane 2002. Daniel Philpott, however, argues that the essence of Al Qaeda’s challenge to the global order was an Islamist, rather than as a terrorist, group. The United States was targeted because it is the most powerful representative of a secularized international political order (Philpott 2002).
leader and as great a threat as Hitler, that the invasion of Kuwait was akin to Hitler’s invasion of
Poland, and that the consequences of failing to overturn Hussein’s aggression would be similar
to those that followed British and French appeasement at Munich in 1938.54 “In most of the
West,” Lance Morrow notes, “Hitler is the 20th century’s term for Great Satan,” and to suggest a
parallel with Hitler is to evoke “evil’s icon” (Morrow 1991; Morrow 2003, 137-38). This
characterization of Saddam Hussein was echoed in the press, most notably by William Safire,
who famously titled a column “The Hitler Analogy” (Safire 1990), and thus in January 1991
nearly as many West Virginians named Saddam Hussein the most evil statesman of the 20th
century (36%) as named Hitler (43%).55 Like Hitler, Saddam was not only brutal but evil, and he
could be neither reasoned with nor appeased.

Rhetoric equating Saddam Hussein with Adolf Hitler and the Iraqi regime with Nazi
Germany did not taper off much during the 1990s. Clinton’s Secretary of State, Madeleine
Albright, characterized Saddam Hussein as “the most evil man the world has seen since Hitler”
(Bennet 1998),56 and this portrait of Iraq’s president became so embedded in popular American
discourse that, in “person on the street” interviews, citizens based their analysis of Iraq on the
Hitler analogy(Wilgoren 1998). Saddam Hussein’s credentials as a figure of towering evil were
thus well established by the time George W. Bush included his regime in the “axis of evil.” His
credentials as a Middle Eastern Hitler were equally well entrenched by the time George W. Bush
alluded to Hitler’s perfidy and past Western errors in March 2003: in issuing a final ultimatum to
Saddam Hussein, he argued that “in the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous

54 See, among many others, Remarks, Fundraising Luncheon for Gubernatorial Candidate Clayton Williams (Dallas,
Texas), 15 October 1990; Remarks, Republican Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, Vermont) 23 October 1990;
Remarks, Republican Party Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, Massachusetts) 1 November 1990; Remarks,
Republican Campaign Rally (Albuquerque, New Mexico), 3 November 1990—all in PPP.
56 See also O’Driscoll 1998.
dictators… In this century … a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this Earth.”

The second rhetorical engine driving the case for war in 2002-2003 was that Saddam Hussein and his regime were terrorists, and this depiction found support in the rhetoric of the Clinton administration. Eschewing the Hitler analogy himself, Clinton argued from the beginning of his presidency that Saddam had committed acts of terrorism. After discovering an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President George H.W. Bush, Clinton authorized missile strikes against Iraqi intelligence headquarters, announcing that “Saddam Hussein has demonstrated repeatedly that he will resort to terrorism or aggression if left unchecked.” Whether this usage of terrorism was appropriate or not, it was widely repeated by administration figures and in the press throughout the Clinton years. American newspapers openly speculated that Iraq had a hand in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Iraq was also fingered for other potential and actual terrorist activity at home and abroad. The image of Saddam Hussein as a terrorist had struck sufficiently deep roots that George W. Bush could credibly accuse Saddam Hussein of “harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, the instruments of mass death and destruction.” This ingrained articulation of Saddam Hussein to terrorism sustained the suggestion that his regime was somehow responsible for September 11 and undercut Democrats who might have otherwise opposed the war.

These two well-established rhetorics assisted the Bush administration immensely as it sought to build domestic support for war. Saddam Hussein was a second Hitler whose appetite for

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58 Address to the Nation on the Strike on Iraqi Intelligence Headquarters, 26 June 1993, *PPP*. See also Clinton, Remarks Announcing a Missile Strike on Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters, 3 September 1996, *PPP*.
60 “The Iraqi Threat” (Cincinnati, OH), 7 October 2002, *PPP*.
weapons of mass destruction was insatiable. He was an inveterate aggressor who, like Hitler, could not be contained or appeased. He was a terrorist, whose regime did not deserve a place among the family of civilized nations and for whom morality imposed no constraints on action. Like Hitler and like the terrorists who committed appalling atrocities in the service of political ends, Saddam Hussein was unquestionably evil. As President Bush put it, “you can't distinguish between Al Qaida and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror … because they're both equally as bad and equally as evil and equally as destructive.”61 One cannot negotiate with evil, one can only wage war against it. Thus the United States was compelled to invade Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Given the hegemonic discourse of the war on terror, opponents of war with Iraq had few rhetorical resources with which to challenge these “logical” steps underpinning the war.

Opposition to the war among Democrats was not unheard of, but it was muted. Democrats in the Senate only narrowly authorized military force against Iraq, voting 27-21 for Joint Resolution 114, and Democrats in the House of Representatives voted down the resolution, 81-126.62 Leading Democratic figures and particularly the front runners for the presidential nomination did, however, overwhelmingly support the war, and party leaders made it “very hard,” according to Sen. Dianne Feinstein, for rank-and-file Democrats to speak out against the war (VandeHei 2002). Part of the reason for the relative silence of the Democrats lies in the imposing rhetorical obstacles they faced after September 11. Since the war on terror served as the key organizing discourse in foreign policy, and given the existing portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, Democrats could not oppose the march to war. All they could do was raise questions about the timing and circumstances of an invasion. The boundaries of sustainable rhetoric had been narrowed after September 11, constraining the space for vocal opposition.

61 Remarks prior to Discussions with President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and an Exchange With Reporters, 25 September 2002, PPP.
62 The overall vote was 77-23 in the Senate, and 296-133 in the House of Representatives.
What arguments did Democrats offer, and why were they fated to make little headway? First, a handful of Democrats opposed an invasion of Iraq from the very beginning, preferring the status quo. Senator Ted Kennedy maintained that “there are realistic alternatives between doing nothing and declaring unilateral or immediate war. War should be a last resort, not the first response” (Staff 2002). These Democrats did not argue that Saddam Hussein was not a threat or that he could be turned aside with sweet reasonableness. Rather, they suggested that containment, combined with a continued inspections regime, remained an adequate response to an Iraq that had been weakened by a decade of economic sanctions. Former Clinton deputy William Galston argued, “We should contain Hussein, deter him and bring him down the way we brought down the Evil Empire that threatened our existence for half a century—through economic, diplomatic, military and moral pressure, not force of arms” (Galston 2002). By invoking the Cold War, Galston cleverly suggested that evil need not be destroyed or conquered. While such a view of evil might have been sustained before September 11, it was unsustainable afterwards. The discourse of the war on terror, to which Democrats had acceded, implied that evil could not be tolerated, nor could Democrats challenge the long-standing charge, made first by a fellow Democrat, that Saddam Hussein supported terrorism. If the evil of terrorists could be eliminated only through coercive means, and if Saddam Hussein was in fact a fellow terrorist, then there was little reason not to apply those same means to Iraq.

Second, other Democrats suggested that the costs of a war would be prohibitive and that the United States had higher priorities on which to expend resources. Sen. Mark Dayton claimed that

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63 The most prominent among these early opponents, Senators Robert Byrd and Ted Kennedy, are the exceptions that prove the rule: old lions of the party, they could speak freely because they held secure seats and no longer had aspirations for national office.

64 See also Mearsheimer and Walt 2003.

65 The argument on behalf of containment was further undercut by Kenneth Pollack, who argued that containment had proved a failure and that war was thus necessary to address the Iraqi threat (Pollack 2002). Pollack’s arguments were bolstered by his claim to expertise, as a former NSC staffer and CIA analyst, and his political affiliation, as he had worked in the Clinton White House.
“we know that the United States would defeat Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. But we don't know the cost in bloodshed, destruction and subsequent occupation. And we don't know the consequences of violating our national principle of not starting wars” (Dayton 2002). Former Vice President Al Gore likewise challenged the administration’s priorities, arguing that an invasion of Iraq would jeopardize both the war on terrorism and US global leadership; the United States needed to focus on ensuring the safety of nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union and on rooting out al-Qaeda. Less often voiced was the implicit assumption that Iraq was not in fact a “grave and growing danger.” Rep. Nancy Pelosi maintained that “as the ranking Democrat on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, I have seen no evidence or intelligence that suggests that Iraq indeed poses an imminent threat to our nation.”

Yet the administration’s rebuttals were compelling, for reasons that should now be abundantly clear. While the administration to some extent sought to show in response that the Iraqi threat was in fact pressing, it also contended that the imminence of the threat was irrelevant and revealed how little opponents grasped the ramifications of the September 11 attacks. In its 2002 National Security Strategy, the administration had argued that imminence was, as a criterion for war, outmoded, for September 11 had proved that one could not wait until forces gathered at the border. While the administration did insist that the costs of invasion and reconstruction would be far lower than the critics forecast (Banerjee 2003; Tyler 2003), the successful articulation of Iraq to the war on terror put critics in the uncomfortable position of having to argue that they would sacrifice national security for the sake of a few dollars. And, for reasons now obvious, attempts to distinguish between the invasion of Iraq and the war on terror failed to comprehend how firmly the two were linked.

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66 “Senate to Debate Iraq Resolution.”
67 President Discusses Growing Danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s Regime, 14 September 2002, PPP; Radio Address by the President to the Nation, 28 September 2002, PPP.
In the post–September 11 rhetorical space, the Democratic politicians who might normally have led the opposition to the invasion generally held their tongues. This was less because they had been persuaded of the Bush administration’s logic and factual claims than because September 11 had deprived them of winning arguments, of socially sustainable avenues of reply. They were the victims of successful rhetorical coercion. Recognizing that their justifications for opposing the war were unlikely to gain rhetorical traction, most Democrats who might otherwise have opposed the administration either jumped on the bandwagon or offered a more modest critique. The dominant discourse of the war on terror did not prevent Democrats from arguing that violating Iraq’s national sovereignty, as opposed to the pursuit of nonstate actors like Al Qaeda, required the imprimatur of the United Nations and the support of the international community. This argument carried much weight with the American public: just a month before the invasion began, a clear majority of Americans opposed going to war without UN sanction (Kull et al. 2003-04, 569-70). But this was necessarily a far weaker form of argument that already conceded the administration’s most fundamental points. Nor was such an argument particularly constraining to the Bush administration, which correctly predicted that Americans’ objections to a unilateral course of action would fall away once the war began. Initially, the public would rally around the flag, and over the long run, its view of the war would be shaped by the success and/or the cost of the operation, not the lack of UN approval.

**Theoretical Implications: The Origins and Power of a Hegemonic Discourse**

As the war in Iraq festers on, as the deaths of American soldiers climb above the two thousand mark, and as the number of Iraqi civilians killed tops 30 thousand, understanding how such a situation arose is of great import. An article challenging conventional accounts would be
worthwhile, regardless of its theoretical contribution. For realists and liberals who think they understand how the United States became embroiled in Iraq—through a combination of ideology, institutional prerogatives, deception, and psychological pathology—this article seeks to demonstrate what a constructivist perspective may contribute to our comprehension of the implications of September 11 and the road to war in Iraq.

But this paper has a theoretical and disciplinary agenda as well. As the scholarly literature over the origins of the Iraq War reveals, talk unquestionably matters. None disagree that the Bush administration’s capacity to control the terms of the debate over Iraq was of critical importance to the outcome. Yet, as this article has sought to show, our understanding of how and when articulations are established as hegemonic and how and when they might be effectively resisted is impoverished. Rhetorical contest cannot be straightforwardly reduced to material power and institutional position, and we cannot fully make sense of the path to war in Iraq in particular and perhaps of politics in general without greater attention to the dynamics of rhetoric itself. At the same time, rhetorical contestation occurs in a historical, material, and institutional environment, and it would be equally problematic to analyze rhetoric divorced from that context. By returning to Aristotle’s ancient insights on rhetoric and by exploiting the theoretical and empirical contributions of contemporary scholars of communication, this article suggests, we can more fully flesh out the universe of mechanisms through which hegemonic discourses take shape, through which those discourses privilege particular representations, and thus through which they “cause” particular policies and outcomes. Aristotle, moreover, points the way toward a more nuanced analysis in which material, institutional, and discursive factors all play distinct and identifiable roles in these processes. This article then seeks to strike a middle ground between two versions of constructivism: an overly agentic account in which actors are hardly
constrained in their articulations and an overly structural account in which discourses form and transform seemingly independent of human agents.

Social theory has long emphasized the arbitrariness of the natural—that is, that an unspoken common sense underlies much political contestation and that that seemingly natural order is itself a product of human agency. The core of this claim is reflected, in different ways, in E.E. Schattschneider’s classic insight that “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider 1960, 68), in psychological research exploring the import of framing on political attitudes and beliefs, in Pierre Bourdieu’s writings on the habitus that structures the everyday cultural forms through which subjects express themselves and the “fields” that bound actors’ “strategic possibilities,” in Ernesto Laclau’s research on the establishment and disruption of doxa (an unquestioned “common sense” discourse), and in Michel Foucault’s genealogies of institutional and disciplinary discourses. Antonio Gramsci recognized the advantage that discursive dominance bequeathed, and he was consequently centrally concerned with how political activists might attain such hegemony. Gramsci understood, and Raymond Williams elaborated, that hegemony is never total, that discourses are never so coherent as to render resistance an impossibility, and thus that discourses are always at best relatively stable. As Stuart Hall puts it, hegemony “should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project. It is always contested, always trying to secure itself, always ‘in process’” (Hall 1988, 7). All discourses, in other words, are subject to challenge, and such episodes of resistance, even when ultimately thwarted, reveal the processes of cultural production and re-production that are essential mechanisms of political power.

If one accepts this core insight—and much scholarship in international relations implicitly does not—tracing those processes and explaining why a particular set of understandings has
become hegemonic should be of paramount importance. Such hegemony does not directly cause a single set of outcomes, but, like structural anarchy, it sets the conditions of possibility for politics, favoring some political programs while putting others at a disadvantage. For critical theorists, revealing such hegemonic articulations is in fact the essential first step toward the goal of depriving them of their privileged status; hegemony is most stable when it is least perceived (or, rather, perceived merely as common sense), and casting light on the processes by which meanings are fixed draws attention to their constructed natures. Denaturalizing the operations of power should, therefore, lie at the heart of the social constructivist enterprise in international relations, but conventional constructivism’s now well-established research program has devoted greater intellectual energy to demonstrating that and explaining why actors in international politics might obey norms despite contrary material pressures.\(^{68}\) This article has, through its study of September 11 and the road to war in Iraq, sought to foreground the processes by which the arbitrary is naturalized and thus to inquire into a key operation of socio-political power.

This is not to imply that mainstream social constructivists have devoted little attention to the origins of the intersubjective understandings that they see as so critical to international politics and foreign policy. In fact, they have increasingly sought to explain how and why new norms emerge and gain adherents.\(^{69}\) Thus many constructivists have increasingly focused on socialization: “the process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community” (Checkel 2005b, 804). Strategic calculation may play a role in prompting behavioral adaptation, but its logic of instrumentalism is at odds with the logic of appropriateness that, such scholarship

\(^{68}\) Seminal works include Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Risse, et al. 1999; Sikkink 1993; Tannenwald 1999. Like any claim made with a broad brush, this one ignores constructivist research that has placed the fixing of meaning front and center. In fact, important constructivist work has suggested such a research agenda, but the fixing of “constructivism” as a research program—a prime instance of the exercise of disciplinary power—has left such research outside the constructivist mainstream (Duvall 2001). For important examples, see Bially Mattern 2004; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Price 1997; Ringmar 1996; Weldes 1999.

\(^{69}\) See, among others, Crawford 2002; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Tannenwald 2005.
suggests, must accompany the internalization of the given norms and values. At some level, whether that of social norms associated with particular roles or that of core preferences, persuasion must occur for enduring change and meaningful socialization.\textsuperscript{70}

Yet elaborating the mechanisms of persuasion has led constructivists to sidestep critical questions regarding the place of power in the production of meaning.\textsuperscript{71} Those who turn to Jürgen Habermas’ logic of “communicative action” for inspiration regarding processes of persuasion problematically draw on a theoretical framework that presupposes an “ideal speech situation” in which power and rank are left at the door and open-minded deliberation consequently predominates.\textsuperscript{72} Yet, as Habermas himself recognizes, the unconstrained dialogue of “communicative action” is not an empirically accurate portrait of politics. Political contest is simply not won by “the unforced force of the better argument,” as Habermas would like. Power and rank are omnipresent in the political sphere, and, as Foucault insisted, they are necessarily embedded in the discourses that structure argumentation.\textsuperscript{73} Given the impossibility, at least in the short to medium run, of designing a novel political language that would be intelligible to one’s interlocutors, real actors in politics cannot escape power.

Similar questions might be raised about another prominent mechanism: learning/teaching. Jeffrey Checkel has usefully suggested that the targets of such socialization efforts will be most receptive when they find themselves in a novel and uncertain environment, do not deeply hold contradictory beliefs, are more insulated from countervailing pressures, and are engaged in deliberation. Perhaps most important, such attempts will be most likely to meet with success

\textsuperscript{70} One possible exception is “self-persuasion,” which may occur when the pressures of cognitive dissonance compel actors to bring their preferences into line with their behavior (Checkel 2005b, 813-14). For good overviews of socialization in constructivist international relations, see Checkel 2005a.

\textsuperscript{71} For a similar characterization, see Barnett and Duvall 2005, 40-41.

\textsuperscript{72} Drawing on Habermas are, among others, Lynch 1999; Lynch 2002; Müller 2001; Risse 2000.

\textsuperscript{73} For a similar argument on the utility of Habermas, see Lukes 2005, 490. On the Foucault-Habermas debate, see Kelly 1994; Love 1989.
when “the socializing agency/individual is an authoritative member of the ingroup to which the target belongs or wants to belong” (Checkel 2005b, 813). The placement of actors into particular roles, as teacher and as student, entails substantial power—not the behavioral conception of power that has long been dominant in international relations, but a power of “knowledge making, universe production, and the social production of feeling and of ‘reality’” (Dirks et al. 1994, 5). When scholars treat the process of authority-production as exogenous, they cannot but fail to grasp the centrality of power.

How then are we to theorize the emergence of discursive hegemony? This process is unproblematic when competition is minimal. Laclau has argued that fascism triumphed in Germany and Italy at least in part because the working class had, for a variety of historical reasons, abandoned the arena of popular-democratic struggle. The strict economism and class reductionism that had come to dominate the socialist movement in Europe prevented the latter from “presenting itself to the dominated classes as a whole as a hegemonic populist alternative” that might have cross-class appeal” (Laclau 1977, 124-34, at 28). Hall has similarly maintained that, in Great Britain, the Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher, triumphed over Labour because only they advanced a “hegemonic project,” only they sought “to reconstruct the terrain of what is ‘taken for granted’ in social and political thought—and so to form a new common sense.” Despite the attractiveness of Labour’s individual policy initiatives, they were unsustainable in the absence of a broader integrated vision. Thatcherite discourse ruled the roost because it had no serious competitors (Hall 1988, 154, ). One might argue that one reason Democrats in the contemporary United States have had difficulty making substantial political

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74 For an analysis of NATO’s “pedagogic role by virtue of the authority it enjoyed qua the key security institution of the Western community with which Czech and Romanian pro-reform elites identified” and from which they learned critical democratic lessons, see Gheciu 2005.
75 Such authoritative roles are, however, built into the structure of some relationships, as in imperial dynamics. See Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990.
gains, despite the Bush administration’s many travails, is that they have failed to effectively frame public debates; while polls show public support for discrete Democratic policy proposals, this latent support is not expressed politically as long as the Democrats fail to put forward a hegemonic project.\textsuperscript{76}

Such accounts are persuasive on their own terms, but rhetorical contestation is the norm in politics. Theorizing discursive hegemony requires that we pose the question differently, more explicitly politically: why do particular sets of articulations succeed in dominating public debate—establishing themselves as hegemonic—in the face of competing articulations? Laclau insightfully suggests that “a class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized” (Laclau 1977, 161). But unless we assume that each unique political scenario makes available a single winning articulation and thus calls for a dominant strategy to be pursued regardless of the other’s rhetorical moves, Laclau’s insight does not answer our question.\textsuperscript{77} Unless one considers the alternatives and explores how and why they were effectively marginalized, the politics of meaning production tend to be obscured.

Countless scholars across multiple disciplines have recognized that discourse is marked more by continuity than change and that even change must be rooted in past discursive formations. Students of transnational activism and social movements have concluded that ways of framing claims cannot be fabricated out of whole cloth but can at most evolve through “grafting”

\textsuperscript{76} On Democrats’ disunity, see Nagourney 2006.

\textsuperscript{77} Laclau also observes that the dominant class establishes and sustains its hegemony “through the absorption of contents forming part of the ideological and political discourses of the dominated classes”—in other words, by taking on aspects of the opposition’s agenda—and “through the articulation into its class discourse of non-class contradictions and interpellations,” such as nationalism, that create a non-class basis for politics (Laclau 1977, 162). Yet it is not clear why only the dominant class should be able to employ such tactics effectively, for in principle challengers may do the same. Laclau’s insight is again useful, but does not answer our question.
(Crawford 2002; Price 1998). James Scott likewise suggests that, at any given time, “the terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle” (Scott 1990, 102). Stuart Hall too stops short of what he calls a “fully discursive” position: “historical formations, which consist of previous but powerfully forged articulations, … establish lines of tendency and boundaries which give to the fields of politics and ideology the ‘open structure’ of a formation and not simply the slide into an infinite and never-ending plurality” (Hall 1988, 10). The mechanism of “rhetorical coercion” presumes that rhetorical commonplaces cannot practically be invented at will. Yet, as an explanation for the *establishment* (as opposed to the operation) of hegemonic articulations, this is not fully satisfying, since discursive traditions are often rich enough to sustain divergent constructions. Rhetorical contestation is trivial when one party puts forward an utterly alien formulation, for its failure to resonate—if not its unintelligibility—is expected. More typically, however, skilled political operators on both sides of a dispute frame events and policy proposals in ways that are familiar to their audiences. In such circumstances, one cannot measure the comparative “rootedness” of articulations in a culture and thereby predict their likely success or failure in the political arena. Both prophetic dualism and the jeremiad were, as we have seen, well grounded in American discourse, and one would have been hard pressed to say, on grounds of historical faithfulness and discursive compatibility alone, which should have won after September 11.

This article has sought to advance a perspective on the production of meaning that departs from both a strictly materialist position and a rigidly postmodernist stance. The former would render the politics of meaning epiphenomenal. The latter would deny the existence of material constraints on meaning production and would aver that we cannot meaningfully speak of the “non-discursive.” This article instead takes theoretical inspiration from critical literature that
strikes for a middle ground. Stuart Hall insists, in his reading of Gramsci, that material forces do not have immediate or necessary consequences, but they do “define the terrain on which historical forces move – they define the horizon of possibilities” (Hall 1996 422).\footnote{See also Grossberg 1986, 56-58; Hall 1986, 40; Hall 1988, 11.} Articulations gain mass traction, Hall suggests, when they touch upon the everyday experiences of mass publics. The triumph of Thatcherism was rooted in “the real and manifestly contradictory experience of the popular classes under social-democratic corporatism,” and Thatcher’s law-and-order rhetoric that justified the expansion of state coercive authority tapped into “the direct experience, the anxieties and uncertainties of ordinary people” who had lived through the upheaval of the late 1960s (Hall 1988, 50, 137). Pierre Bourdieu rightly warns that “legitimating discourses” are not sufficient as an explanation for domination and the creation of a (contestable) orthodoxy, let alone an (uncontested) common sense. Rather, such discourses, he maintains, must be institutionally sustained (Bourdieu 1977, 188).

The arguments offered above regarding the fixing of meaning after September 11 locate the production of meaning not in material factors, institutional position, discursive formations, or historical context alone, but in their conjunction.

- Articulations cannot but draw upon existing discursive formations. The Bush administration framed September 11 and the terrorist threat in the traditional binary of US foreign policy discourse, in the language of prophetic dualism. Its opponents structured their counterarguments in an equally well-grounded American rhetorical form, the jeremiad. Each employed a language familiar to audiences, but that too implies that the terms of the frame were not determinative in this case (and probably more generally). The construction of meaning out of existing discursive formations is, one might say, a necessary but not sufficient condition for success in rhetorical competition.

- Positionality is hardly irrelevant. President Bush enjoyed an advantage in the post-September 11 rhetorical competition by virtue of his position. In the wake of an unprecedented attack, he issued the pronouncements to which others were compelled to respond. Had similarly framed claims originated in another institutional site, their impact would not have been nearly as great. This
in institutional power, however, was not by itself sufficient for success. Had Bush justified the military operations in Afghanistan and the broader war on terror on pragmatic grounds, opponents might have more effectively countered his claims. Even motivated presidents who pull out the rhetorical stops have many times failed to mobilize publics for their foreign policy goals and have instead encountered substantial opposition.

- The particular circumstance and the rhetoric it demanded also played a critical causal role. Bush’s first mover advantage was unusually great in this case because the September 11 attacks called for an overwhelmingly epideictic rhetoric that would place these horrific events in an interpretive context for the nation. In this rhetorical form, dissent violates the audience’s expectations and is swiftly dismissed. In contrast, had Bush been seeking to generate a sense of crisis—rather than respond to events that the mass public (apparently with little guidance or mediation) assimilated into a crisis frame—he would have relied more heavily on pragmatic argumentation. Such deliberative rhetoric is, in principle, far more open to criticism and thus permits for a more vocal opposition.

The production of discursive hegemony after September 11 requires a conjunctural analysis in which none of these factors is privileged. To (perhaps awkwardly) reduce this account to causal language, it might be said that these are all jointly necessary and sufficient.

Equally important, we argue that the establishment of discursive hegemony has substantial consequences for subsequent political contestation and policy outcomes. The administration’s successful campaign to bring the United States into war with Iraq hinged on a post-September 11 rhetorical environment dominated by prophetic dualism. In this context, and given the characterizations of Saddam Hussein and Iraq since the first Gulf War, the link between Al Qaeda and Iraq that would underpin the war was eminently sustainable. Given the bipartisan consensus in favor of the “war” on terror—and given even Bill Clinton’s past depiction of Saddam as a terrorist—the burden of proof fell on those who would oppose extending that war to Iraq. Potential opponents of the war with Iraq found themselves rhetorically hemmed in, unable to offer a compelling case against an aggressive policy or even the immediacy of the threat. Few Democrats in Congress challenged the essentials of the administration’s arguments. Many climbed on the bandwagon, and some suggested a “friendly amendment” to the call for war,
insisting on the imprimatur of the UN and a broad-based international coalition akin to that assembled in 1990 prior to the first Gulf War.

**In Place of a Conclusion: Was a Different Outcome Possible?**

The foregoing argument may convey an air of inevitability regarding the outcome of war in Iraq. In some sense, this is true. In the moment, during the debates of fall 2002 and winter/spring 2003, there was little Democrats could have done to have waylaid a Bush administration determined to launch a war. But, viewed through a longer timeframe, the outcome was far from inevitable. The Bush administration need not have cast the perpetrators and planners of September 11 as “evil-doers,” and it need not have called for an expansive “war on terror”—even if it had opted for a militarized response. The Bush administration certainly had much discretion about how broad or narrow a war on terror it would pursue. Nevertheless, the rhetorical resources available to the opposition after September 11 and then again in the run-up to war in Iraq were meager indeed.

Although preventing the march to war may not have been possible, the Democrats could have taken a braver stance that might have laid the groundwork for a more potent political opposition when the war went sour. Senator John Kerry’s bid for the presidency in 2004 was weakened by his seemingly contradictory positions on the war and on reconstruction assistance. Nearly the entire field of Democratic presidential candidates was compelled endlessly to explain why they opposed a war that they had earlier authorized. Their arguments were often reasonable, but they came off as tortured. Had Kerry voted initially against the war, he might now be sitting in the White House.
The post-September 11 foreign policy discourse of good and evil and of the war on terror need not always be with us. Discourse is always subject to challenge and is always laced through with contradictions. Hegemonies may be disrupted, creating space for political change: democracy, once unquestioningly linked to mob rule, acquired a new character when articulated to liberal political discourse (Laclau 1977, 8). As contradictions accumulate, the space for resistance grows as well. The stubborn lack of progress with regard to security or development in Iraq, the steadily climbing casualties among civilians and soldiers alike, and the regular revelations regarding the manipulation of prewar intelligence are creating opportunities for an increasingly vocal opposition. Such an opposition will not, however, be effective in undermining the dominant post-September 11 discourse if its calls for withdrawal from Iraq are divorced from a hegemonic project that advances an alternative to the war on terror. Challenging hegemony is never easy, even when the structural conditions are right. The disruption of hegemony requires the bold exercise of agency.

79 See also Bourdieu 1977, 164-73.
References


