Fixing the Meaning of September 11:

Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq

Ronald R. Krebs (corresponding author)
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Minnesota
rkrebs@umn.edu

Jennifer Lobasz
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of Minnesota
jlobasz@polisci.umn.edu

The authors are grateful to Robert Art, Bud Duvall, David Edelstein, Patrick Jackson, Robert Jervis, John Mueller, Daniel Nexon, Jon Western, Wesley Widmaier, and Michael Williams for helpful critical comments that have saved us from many errors and have greatly improved the article. An earlier version was presented at the 2006 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association and at seminars at Northwestern University and the University of Haifa: thanks to all who participated in those forums for their constructive criticism.
Fixing the Meaning of September 11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq

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; Pollack 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 launch a war against 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 needless and costly wars in the future. These accounts, both scholarly and popular, have emphasized the Bush

¹ For a skeptical view, see Keohane and Katzenstein 2006.
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 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 fractured nature of the Democratic opposition, and individuals’ reasoning
errors with regard to risk.²

Such arguments 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. President Bush did frame
the national dialogue on Iraq, but this cannot be straightforwardly attributed to his institutional
position. The failure of most leading Democrats to challenge the core of Bush’s case for war was
critical to his success, yet it has not been adequately explained. Prominent Democrats split three
ways in the debates over Iraq: a minority defended the status quo of containment, many openly
embraced an aggressive US posture, and a large group offered a qualified endorsement, at most
pressing for greater international support.³ By conceding the administration’s central claims, this
third, especially important, faction was relatively silent: it offered at most a sophisticated gloss
on the administration’s stance and thus could not serve as an effective opposition.⁴ Any adequate
explanation of the path to war in Iraq must be situated theoretically in a framework that can
account for the many past efforts to construct threats that failed to gain traction and for the
presence or absence of a vocal opposition.

² See Freedman 2004; Kaufmann 2004; Mueller 2005b; Western 2005a. On democracy promotion, neoconservatism,
and Iraq, see Fukuyama 2006; McCartney 2004; Monten 2005; Williams 2005.
³ For a similar characterization of the Democratic field, see Hess 2006; Western 2005a.
⁴ We recognize that some Democrats vocally opposed the war, that many others were hardly literally silent, and that
all received at least some media coverage. When we write of Democrats’ “relative silence,” we are using a
shorthand to refer to leading Democrats’ failure to challenge the essence of the administration’s case.
Existing accounts have difficulty addressing 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 with regard to Iraq was made possible by its effective fixing of the meaning of September 11 in terms of a Manichaean struggle in the “war on terror.” Why was the administration so successful in establishing this discourse as hegemonic? We locate the explanation in the conjuncture of discursive traditions, institutional positionality, rhetorical mode, and historical context. None of these is by itself sufficient to explain the outcome. (1) The Bush administration drew on the traditional binaries of US foreign policy discourse in narrating September 11 and the terrorist threat. Yet such traditions are often rich enough to sustain multiple, even opposed, narratives, and we identify both conceivable and actually deployed competing narratives that were well rooted in existing discursive formations but nevertheless failed to carry the day. (2) Bush enjoyed an advantage in the rhetorical competition by virtue of his institutional position. Yet the rhetorical power of the presidency is not a sufficient explanation: even motivated presidents have many times failed to mobilize publics for their foreign policy goals, proved unable to define and confine public debate, and consequently encountered substantial opposition. (3) Bush’s advantage was especially great in this case because he and his aides (as well as like-minded pundits and policy wonks) adopted a rhetoric of identity that imposed high hurdles to dissent. (4) Relatedly, Bush’s turn to the epideictic was not merely fortuitous or even strategic, but was a response to the historical

---

5 Following Gramsci and many others, we aver that hegemony does not render resistance futile. Complete hegemony is something for which actors may strive, but can never fully achieve. Even hegemonic discourses always contain enough contradictory strands to permit contestation. As Stuart Hall puts it, hegemony “should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project. It is … always ‘in process’”; maintaining a dominant or hegemonic discourse requires “ceaseless work” (Hall 1988, 7, 133). Yet it would be foolish to deny that some discourses do establish themselves as dominant, constituting for many an unquestioned common sense and marginalizing alternative discourses. We contend that a particular meaning of the September 11 attacks did become (relatively) dominant in short order and remained so through the invasion of Iraq. Challenging that hegemonic discourse has become more common as the difficulties of the Iraq occupation have mounted and become well known.
moment. The circumstances—coordinated attacks on sites of commercial, institutional, and national power that were, apparently with little contemporaneous guidance, immediately represented by the media and perceived by the mass public as directed at the nation and as ushering in a national crisis—gave rise to what Aristotle called “epideictic” rhetoric: that is, rhetoric that would make sense of these unprecedented events while reaffirming the ideals of the political community.  

Second, this “discursive hegemony” hindered the potential Democratic political opposition in the subsequent Iraq debates, so that leading figures who might have otherwise sought to resist the administration contested its claims only at the margins. In short, they became the victims of successful “rhetorical coercion”: a strategy that seeks to rhetorically constrain political opponents and maneuver them into public assent to one’s preferred terms of debate and ideally policy implications. Since the beginnings of the first Gulf crisis in 1990, US leaders had regularly characterized Saddam Hussein as a second Hitler; later, President Bill Clinton began portraying the Iraqi leader as a terrorist. This established portrait of Saddam Hussein, when combined with the hegemonic “war on terror” discourse, helps explain one of the enduring puzzles of the domestic Iraq War debate: why did the vast majority of Americans allege, on the basis of little evidence, that Saddam Hussein had a finger in the September 11 attacks, and why was challenging the administration’s insinuations to that effect so difficult?

Much mainstream academic writing has been characterized by a remarkable unreflectiveness about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. 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

---

6 Later, the nature of epideictic rhetoric will be explored in greater detail. For introductions to Aristotle’s rhetorical modes, see the entries on deliberative, epideictic, forensic, and hybrid genres in Sloane 2001.
intolerable incidents” (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 did not have to lead to a “war on terror.” It mattered how it was publicly represented and whether, by whom, and how those representations were contested. And certainly it need not have led to war in Iraq, for that was the product of the careful articulation of the long-standing Iraqi threat to the new global war on terror.7 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).

This article grapples with a single puzzling and unusually important historical case. In so doing, it advances a theoretically grounded account of how and why particular sets of articulations dominated public debate after the attacks of September 11 in the face of competing articulations. It thus explores the conditions under which and the processes through which political actors strive, more or less effectively, for discursive hegemony and thus structure ensuing foreign policy choices.8 This article’s agenda is in accord with that of constructivist scholars of international relations who have argued powerfully for the independent causal effect of national culture and international norms on foreign policy, in contrast especially with structural realist approaches. Mainstream constructivists have focused their attention in part on explaining how and why new norms emerge and gain adherents—that is, on the emergence of

---

7 Constructivist accounts of foreign policy in general and counterterror in particular suggest that other states might not have responded to similar attacks in this fashion. See Katzenstein 1996; Katzenstein 2003.
8 This article’s focus, however, is primarily empirical, with the theory left largely implicit and embedded. Space constraints prevent us from developing the broader theoretical argument in great detail.
hegemonic ideas and principles. However, in turning to mechanisms of persuasion and education to account for enduring normative change and meaningful socialization, they have sidestepped critical questions regarding the place of power in the production of meaning. In contrast, this article seeks to foreground the processes by which the arbitrary is made to seem natural and thus to inquire into a key operation of socio-political power.

This article proceeds in four main sections. First, we argue that the existing explanations of the administration’s successful “inflation” of the Iraq threat are insufficient. Then, we present contending interpretations of the September 11 terrorist attacks and explain how one became dominant. In the third section, we link this hegemonic understanding of September 11 to subsequent political contestation over Iraq, showing how this, in combination with existing representations, tied the tongues of leading Democrats. We then conclude with some thoughts about whether and how things might have turned out otherwise.

**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—was mistaken has led to a scholarly “threat inflation” industry. The central claim is 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

---

9 As subjective ideas become “stable intersubjective understandings”—that is, norms—they crowd out alternatives. In other words, they establish themselves as hegemonic. On the origins of international norms, see, among others, Crawford 2002; Finnemore 2003; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Tannenwald 2005.


11 For a similar characterization, see Barnett and Duvall 2005, 40-41.
supported the war effort only because the threat had been so exaggerated (Kaufmann 2004; Mueller 2005b; Western 2005a). While these accounts highlight factors of substantial import, they are ultimately not satisfying. If we wish to understand how the administration and its domestic allies effectively inflated the Iraq threat, we must also both explore how they legitimated their threat assessments and explain why their opponents, actual and conceivable, proved unable to delegitimate their narrative.

First, some note, correctly, that presidents in the United States enjoy particular authority with regard to foreign affairs. Thanks to the deference historically accorded them, Congress’ abdication of its own responsibilities with regard to the use of force, and the executive’s control over classified information, it is sometimes argued that presidents’ preferred frames dominate public debate, particularly in foreign affairs (Kaufmann 2004, 37-43; Western 2005b, 108-09, 17-20). Bush exploited his position in reframing the debate over Iraq from one that focused on the possibility of containment to one that emphasized Saddam Hussein’s terrorist links and the prospect of an Iraq-facilitated attack on the United States (Kaufmann 2004, 35-37).

However, attributing Bush’s success to his institutional position alone overstates presidents’ power to set the terms of debate (frame) and to lead public opinion (persuade)—even on matters about which they care deeply and even with regard to international politics. The bully pulpit’s influence is often overblown, and on a wide range of issues—including national security—presidents have not regularly imposed dominant frames or shaped public opinion: they have served more as “facilitators” who reflect and perhaps intensify and channel widely held views than as “directors” who lead opinion (Edwards III 2003). 12 Ronald Reagan, for example, bitterly

---

12 There is some suggestive evidence that popular presidents can lead public opinion and that when they do, other voices—in their administration, among the opposition, and in civil society—have little impact. But the effects also seem to be reasonably small: “Opinion leadership is not quick or easy; the public is not very malleable… Intensive efforts over several months by highly popular presidents appear to bring about changes in opinion poll results of
recalled his “inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America” as one of his greatest “frustrations” (Edwards III 2003, 6). When presidents “go public” (Kernell 1986), they *can* effectively shape legislation, but only when their stance is popular—that is, when they seek to shift policy in a direction that accords with current mass opinion (Canes-Wrone 2005). The rise of cable television and, according to some, of a generally more independent media has in recent years further undercut presidents’ (already limited) capacity 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 typically did not vocally oppose the war turns their relative silence into the central puzzle.

Second, and closely related, John Mueller has observed that politicians (and by extension the media) 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 2005b, 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. The problem again, however, is one of overprediction. If Mueller were right, moves toward war would almost never meet with much resistance, which would arise only once casualties started to stream in (Mueller 1973). Yet efforts to construct threats and a sense of crisis have hardly proved only some 5 or 10 percentage points, hardly a tidal wave. On few issues can presidents afford to invest even that much effort” (Page and Shapiro 1985, 34). See also Edwards III 2003, chaps. 2-3; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Sobel 2001. For dissenting views, see Cohen 1997; Whittington and Carpenter 2003, 498-502, 04-06.
universally successful, even when it is the president who leads the charge. In fact, the list of failed recent presidential efforts to build support for particular threats abroad is long: Reagan on Lebanon, El Salvador, Grenada, and especially Nicaragua; GHW Bush on Haiti; Clinton on Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and Kosovo. With regard to the 2003 Iraq War, some have attributed leading Democrats’ relative 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 (at least for coalition forces), victory (VandeHei and Eilperin 2002a). While this may have lingered in some minds, the larger lesson was 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 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).

Third, and also 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 2005a, chap. 6). Mueller (2005, 228) has further argued that the public typically harbors “irrational fears about remote dangers,” is often uninformed, and, in

---

13 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. Jane Cramer has argued that a post–World War II “militarized patriotism” accounts both for the lack of vocal opposition to Bush’s drive for war and for the absence of an assertive media (Cramer 2006), yet this too tends toward overprediction: the many failures of attempts at threat inflation are inexplicable from this perspective.

14 Lawrence Freedman argues, however, that the real problem lay with intelligence oversimplified to boost agency influence and relevance. To the extent that there was conscious manipulation, he maintains, the administration appears to have “hoodwinked” itself more than it did the country (Freedman 2004, 39).
combination with institutional asymmetries, is easily manipulated.\textsuperscript{15} 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 \textit{causally} critical. If Kaufmann (2004) is right that there was enough information publicly available 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 discrepant evidence.\textsuperscript{16}

Fourth, many have pointed to the mainstream media’s uncritical presentation of the administration’s claims as contributing to the skewed public debate (Kaufmann 2004, 44-45; Western 2005b, 127-28).\textsuperscript{17} Yet if the press did in fact abdicate its professional obligation to speak truth to power, the question is why it did so. In fact, existing studies suggest 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: criticism in official circles opens space for coverage of criticism outside Washington. When the political opposition is itself relatively silent, voices not represented in the official debate are ignored or marginalized.\textsuperscript{18} The media thus “indexes” high-profile debates (Bennett 1990; Bennett 2004; Cook 1998; Hallin 1986; Mermin 1999), and these dynamics are only exacerbated in times of

\textsuperscript{15} However, public opinion, despite individual ignorance and inconsistency, is collectively rational (Page and Shapiro 1992), and the operative mechanism appears to be elite cuing. This raises serious questions about democratic deliberation and choice, but the problem here was that elites spoke largely with a single voice—highlighting again the relative silence of the Democrats.

\textsuperscript{16} Of course Kaufmann may be wrong, and information contradicting the administration’s claims may not have existed or may have lacked credibility. On the contemporaneous plausibility of the administration’s assessments regarding Iraqi WMD programs, and thus contra Kaufmann, see Jervis 2006.

\textsuperscript{17} This abdication has been well documented in Friel and Falk 2004; Jamieson and Waldman 2003, chapter 6; Massing 2004; Mermin 2004; Miller 2004.

\textsuperscript{18} Alternative media 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).
war (Bennett 1994, 23; Jamieson and Waldman 2003, 12-22).\(^{19}\) To the extent that journalists do criticize, they do so within the terms of the Washington consensus, focusing on implementation and outcome (Mermin 1999, 8-11). The media’s relatively uncritical presentation of the administration’s case in 2002-2003 reflected Democrats’ inability to advance a united opposition voice that would have warranted sustained coverage. Again, the relative silence of a critical group of Democrats calls for explanation.\(^{20}\)

Fifth, observers have turned 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 tend to overestimate risk, particularly with regard to rare events over which they feel they have no control (Slovic 2000). The September 11 attacks exacerbated this, and Americans saw still far-off concerns (Iraq’s acquiring nuclear weapons) and low probability events (Iraq’s sharing such weapons with Al Qaeda) as more likely (Huddy et al. 2003; Sunstein 2003). With decisions made on the basis of possibility rather than probability, the Bush administration’s case for invading Iraq seemed strong (Gambetta 2004; Krebs 2005, 200-01). However, this account is not supported by data. The American public was not enthusiastic about war with Iraq, and it resisted even the administration’s stepped-up efforts in the fall of 2002. As late as the month before the war, a clear majority of Americans said the United States should not attack Iraq without the UN’s imprimatur, suggesting that they distinguished, to some meaningful extent, between possibility and probability (Kull et al. 2003-04).

\(^{19}\) The reasons for indexing include, among others: the efficiency of relying on official sources; the predictability and credibility of official sources; the interests of major news corporations; and the journalistic norm of “balance.” With regard to the use of force abroad, journalists’ concerns about appearing unpatriotic also foster subservience to official narratives. See also Massing 2005a; Massing 2005b; McChesney 1999. For critical views of “indexing,” alleging that the media has recently become more independent, see Althaus 2003; Edwards III 2003, 172-83. Some have found that, at least with regard to foreign policy, the media’s agenda has more shaped, than been shaped by, presidential priorities: see Edwards III and Wood 1999; Wood and Peake 1998.

\(^{20}\) The rhetorical dynamics explored later in the paper may also have operated directly on the press, contributing to the lack of tough-minded investigative journalism. Had a vocal Democratic opposition emerged, however, editors’ fears of losing advertising and sales would presumably have been alleviated.
The existing claims about “threat inflation” and the Iraq War highlight important dynamics, but they are incomplete. They are rooted in theoretical arguments that tend toward over-prediction, and many point back to a critical under-explained question: why did most leading Democrats either line up behind the administration or at best offer a modest critique? Why were the Democrats unable to forge a unified opposition to the war? Any proper account of how the Iraq threat was successfully “sold” must be situated theoretically in a framework that can account for the many dogs that do not bark. The very notion of threat inflation implies that how political actors represent circumstances is critical. Yet the causal mechanisms in existing accounts are distinctly non-rhetorical, focusing seemingly on everything but the language employed in the construction of consent. All policies, however, require legitimation—that is, the social production of consensus—and this process is inherently problematic in regimes with even a modicum of contestation. Even “unexaggerated” threats face actual or at least conceivable arguments to the contrary, and thus there is always the possibility that a political opposition will coalesce. Whatever the outcome, legitimation requires explanation.

We argue that, to understand how the Iraq War was made possible, one must explore the legacy of the September 11 attacks on US political discourse, in conjunction with other genealogical elements. September 11 figures in existing accounts largely as a political resource cynically deployed by the administration to create the impression that the Iraqi regime was 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 hawks in its ranks) had harbored all along (Freedman 2004, 18-20; Kaufmann 2004, 16-19, 46). Supporters of the Iraq War did tend to associate the Hussein regime with the attacks (Kull et al. 2003-04, 576-77), but this was made possible by the

---

21 On the politics of legitimation, see Goddard 2006; Jackson 2006.
22 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).
way in which September 11 was represented. The next section examines competing representations of the September 11 attacks and offers a theoretically-rooted explanation for why one interpretation came to seem natural. Only by revealing the processes through which that representation was rendered seemingly obvious and inevitable can the meaning of September 11 be denaturalized and the road to war in Iraq properly understood.

**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, in which the threat of mass-casualty terrorism suddenly became very real, and in which the ethical distinction between preemption and prevention seemed outmoded. This interpretation of September 11 privileged and thus underpinned numerous domestic and foreign policy initiatives, for established policies had to prove their continued relevance. It in fact presumed that what was old was inherently flawed and that what was new was necessarily an appropriate adjustment to new realities. The result was 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 2007). Faced with an event that demanded an interpretive response, US foreign policy elites unsurprisingly fell back on older

---

23 See also Jackson 2006; Shotter 1993.
tropes to represent this singular event.\textsuperscript{24} In other words, September 11 did not change everything, and discursive continuity imparted a power to the administration’s efforts to impose meaning on these mute events.\textsuperscript{25} But foreign policy discourses are also sufficiently rich to make possible multiple narratives, and other interpretations of the attacks strove for hegemony in the public sphere. Nevertheless, one—that favored by the Bush administration—emerged as dominant. 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 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. 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. As President Bush put it, two days after the attacks:

\begin{quote}
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.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Many historians have noted that neither the administration’s disdain for international institutions, nor its promotion of democracy, nor even its “vindicationist” approach were particularly new. See Kennedy 2005; Leffler 2004, 22-24; McCartney 2004; Monten 2005.

\textsuperscript{25} Much of the discussion that follows focuses on the representations advanced by President Bush and other administration figures. This is not to suggest that persons outside the government—among the punditocracy, in think tanks, on opinion pages, or even on talk radio—were irrelevant. Just the opposite. They were not only essential to the reproduction of administration rhetoric, but they also sometimes inspired government officials, providing them with soon-to-be standard formulations. The philosophical and political project of neoconservatism, for instance, had little in its early stages to do with official Washington (for an incisive analysis, see Williams 2005). However, such efforts garnered more attention when embraced by the president and his aides. Tracing processes of transmission is extremely labor-intensive and would not, we think, add much to our central arguments.
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.”26 Such “evil” cannot be negotiated or reasoned with; violence must be met with violence; and a “war on terror” was proclaimed.27

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. 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 implicitly as groundless as was European anti-Semitism a century before (Mousseau 2002/03). Others emphasized that anti-Americanism reflects frustration with the lack of responsive government at home (Ajami 2001), and others portrayed the United States as the latest in a long line of scapegoats for the decline of Islamic civilization (Lewis 2003). Still others suggested that the root cause was the civil war being waged over Arab and Muslim identity and that the attacks sought to provoke an overreaction from the United States so as to further the goal of Islamic revolution (Doran 2001).

At the core of these contending accounts lies a common narrative element: “we” were attacked because of “who we are,” not because of “what we have done.”

This narrative soon proved dominant. In reportage, national identity discourse—including the invocation of core American values and the demonization of the enemy—overshadowed all other framings in the ensuing weeks (Coe et al. 2004; Hutcheson et al. 2004). The administration’s political opponents, who had exulted in its missteps over China and in the domestic arena, rallied behind not only the president’s policies, but his rhetoric. Until 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).

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 political support and implicitly sanctioned its occupation of Palestinian territory. It had, by spreading neoliberal economic policies, threatened traditional ways of life, 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 US capitalist regime’s inexorable impulse for imperialist expansion. In September 11 the United States reaped what it had sowed.

These various voices, mostly but not exclusively from the Left, not only charged the United States with a litany of misdeeds, but suggested a far less flattering portrait of the nation. They implied that America had been attacked not only because of “what we have done,” but also because of what our actions revealed about “who we are.” The attacks were represented as a wake-up call for Americans to change their ways of acting in the world. This alternative did not contest the administration’s portrait of American values, but it questioned whether Americans

For such arguments, see Barsamian 2001; Scraton 2002; Vanden Heuvel 2002.

From the religious Right, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson paralleled this rhetoric in blaming September 11 on corruption at home: the 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.
have lived up to those aspirations or had been undone by weakness or even hypocrisy. This narrative sufficiently penetrated the debate that many responded to its claims, but it gained little assent beyond the true believers on the Left. In fact, public opinion remained fairly steady between 2001 and 2004 in denying that US wrongdoing abroad had underlain the September 11 attacks; in late September 2001, 33 percent of Americans believed that US foreign policy was at least partly responsible, and over the next three years that number rose only slightly (Kohut et al. 2004).

That the administration’s preferred framing of September 11 would approach hegemony cannot be attributed simply to the rhetorical power of the presidency. A more complete answer, we suggest, would focus squarely on the rhetorical dynamics. Both the administration and its opponents rooted their interpretations of September 11 in older rhetorical forms. Both, invoking the language of good and evil, also drew upon the religiosity and exceptionalism that have long been central themes in US political discourse. Sustainable rhetoric requires that speakers make use of existing discursive formations, and thus how these were reworked merits investigation. But because both the administration and its opponents could draw upon these hoary tropes, we suggest a conjunctural explanation that joins them to historical context, rhetorical mode, and institutional position. Rhetorical claims advanced by national leaders are more contestable in principle when wrapped in a pragmatic or legal rhetoric than when they are offered in an identity-rooted mode. The attacks on September 11 called forth rhetoric in this last mode, placing Bush’s preferred interpretation in a particularly advantageous rhetorical position.

*Foreign Policy in the Garden of Good and Evil*

After September 11, the Bush administration portrayed America’s adversaries as the country’s antithesis: evil (rather than good), despotic (rather than free), forces of instability
(rather than stability). Its rhetoric thus embraced a long tradition of "prophetic dualism" in US foreign policy discourse. Prophetic dualism, according to Philip Wander, "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 narrows to the question of 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; 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." Three years later, Clinton sounded a similar note after the 1998 bombings of the 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… America is and will remain a target of terrorists precisely because we are leaders; because we act to advance peace, democracy and basic human values." The language of evil has been ubiquitous in

---

31 See also Windt Jr. 1973.
32 Remarks at the University of Connecticut, 15 October 1995, and Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address, 23 April 1995, PPP.
33 Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan, 20 August 1998, PPP.
Bush’s speech; between September 2001 and February 2006, no less than 381 of his addresses employed the language of “evil.”34 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 Adolf Hitler and by characterizing the former’s agenda as “Islamo-fascism,” thus implying further 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 not fully grasped or understood: as Lance Morrow puts it, “Evil prowls at the margins of our rationality.” 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.35 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 seek only 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.36

Bush’s penchant for moralistic binaries seemingly departed from a more recent hesitance to label events, acts, and people evil. In the late 1970s, Susan Sontag suggested that contemporary

---

34 Based on a search of PPP. On religious argumentation and the prophetic tradition in Clinton’s rhetoric on terrorism as well, see Winkler 2005.
35 Americans have thus been obsessed with “naming the Antichrist,” associated with various countries, historical figures, communal groups, and even technologies. See Fuller 1995; McGinn 1994.
36 Although Bush sought to downplay the religious aspects of the conflict, 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 Domke 2004; Lincoln 2003, 29-32; Singer 2004.
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 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). 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 resonated across the political spectrum, suggests that these observers 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 unusually firmly rooted in popular American culture, alongside the rise of evangelical Christianity, particularly the conservative variant sometimes disparagingly called “fundamentalism.” Such premillennial evangelical Protestants embrace 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

---

37 President Ronald Reagan, however, did not shy away from such language: he notoriously characterized the Soviet Union as “evil” in a 1982 speech to the British House of Commons and more famously as “an evil empire” and as “the focus of evil in the modern world” the following year in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet the responses were also revealing. Conservative ideologues hailed Reagan for his moral bravery, but many more, in the United States and abroad, disparaged him for having complicated arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. In fact, one historian observes, “Widespread criticism of his ‘evil empire’ speech apparently shook him: although his view of the Soviet system did not change, Reagan was careful, after that point, to use more restrained language in characterizing it” (Gaddis 1990, 325).

38 See also Baudrillard 1993.

39 We recognize that evangelicals are a diverse group in their beliefs, practices, and political involvement (see Krapohl and Lippy 1999). To some extent our observations apply to all evangelicals, but they are particularly applicable to the important subset that Mark Noll has labeled evangelical Protestant conservatives (Noll 2001).
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). For evangelical Christians in particular, evil is a palpable presence in the world, and Satan’s minions can and must be identified.

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 single largest religious category (Kohut et al. 2003, 65-68)—but even more impressive has been their cultural impact beyond the community of self-identified evangelicals. Christian eschatology has been popularized, most notably in the best-selling 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 have more recently declared that they believe the events described in the Book of Revelation will occur at some point in the future. Increasing numbers of Americans, including apparently President George W. Bush, share the apocalyptic worldview. 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 percent of Americans “believe in” the devil or Satan. To Americans, both evangelicals and non-evangelicals, 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 evangelical discourse.

This representation of September 11 thus drew upon a deeply rooted strain in US political culture that had in recent decades been reinvigorated by the increasing popularity of premillennial evangelism. It enjoyed a further rhetorical advantage in that it appeared to compel opponents to do the unthinkable: support the war on terror or make common cause with evil. Prophetic dualism is also psychically rewarding: to name another as evil is to hail oneself as essentially good, and thus this rhetorical mode inhibits introspection. 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 go with the rhetorical territory.

Jeremiah and the Devil Within

The rhetoric of the opposition, however, also identified villain and victim and was equally well grounded in the evangelical eschatology that has 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. 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, the opposition suggested that 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, dating back to colonial New England: the jeremiad. Like the haranguing biblical prophet from which it took its name, the jeremiad suggested that those who attacked the community were doing God’s will,
punishing it for its collective transgressions, and it called on the audience to repent and expurgate the devil within (Bercovitch 1978). The elements and structure of the jeremiad have, typically in a more secular form, been identified in genres and substantive discourses from the Puritan era through the present, and Ronald Reagan in particular rose to national prominence in the 1970s by adopting its rhetoric (Aune 2001, 123-26). When 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 narrative did not, therefore, 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 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. Reinforcing communal values, even as it upbraids the audience for violating them, the jeremiad reproduces the dominant discourse, but it also calls for at least limited policy reform (Murphy 1990), and change, even that which leaves the social order intact, is comparatively rare.

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

---

43 On the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre, see also Carpenter 1978; Murphy 1990.
44 For a problematic attempt to treat Bush’s rhetoric as a jeremiad, see Smith 2005.
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.\(^{45}\) 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 situation, the rhetorical mode which that context called forth, and the national leader’s institutional position.

The mode in which a speaker proceeds is, at least in part, a product of the situation that he confronts.\(^{46}\) 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 what was widely and immediately perceived, seemingly in an unmediated fashion, as an attack on the homeland.\(^{47}\) No national leader could have blithely ignored the attacks of September 11, nor was it sustainable to represent them as routine threats to the political order—certainly not in the United States, in which terrorist attacks in general have been rare and in which attacks on that scale were

\(^{45}\) For a related argument, see Legro 2005.
\(^{46}\) The selected frame might also be the product of the speaker’s purpose, nature, or characteristics, as well as the message’s form or medium (Benoit 2000). On “situation” and generic analysis, see Jamieson 1973; Jamieson and Campbell 1982; Miller 1984.
\(^{47}\) The attacks of September 11 were, according to the dominant rhetoric, attacks on the nation-state, but this should hardly be treated as unproblematic. These events could have been represented differently: for example, as attacks on the central symbols of the neoliberal empire, as crimes against humanity, or as crimes against innocents (and to some extent they were as the last two). Thus it would be productive to explore the social processes through which these alternatives were rendered nearly inconceivable. However, precisely because such representations received very little play in practice, even on the Left, we will not problematize the claim that the September 11 attacks were directed against the state or homeland. Thanks to ** for discussion on this point.
unprecedented. What was needed was a rhetoric that would make sense of these shocking events, identify the perpetrators, explain what they wanted, reaffirm the nation’s ideals, and reassure the public that security would be restored (Condit 1985). The rhetoric of crisis is consequently the rhetoric of identity, providing the occasion for re-narrations of national self-conceptions: it only secondarily seeks to articulate a rational policy response (Cherwitz and Zagacki 1986; Dow 1989).

Such rhetoric falls into the genre labeled by Aristotle epideictic, or demonstrative. In his important work, The Art of Rhetoric, Aristotle loosely defines this genre as an often ceremonial, even ritualistic, rhetorical form marked particularly by themes of praise and blame (as opposed to the pragmatic justifications of deliberative rhetoric and the justice-oriented themes of forensic rhetoric): eulogies, such as Pericles’ famous Funeral Oration, are classic examples of epideictic rhetoric. For Aristotle, epideictic rhetoric serves a crucial political/pedagogical function, helping to maintain an orderly society with well defined social roles (Aristotle 1991, 104-10). Not all epideictic rhetoric is quite so conventional and formal, however, and, as Celeste Condit observes, the primary function of epideictic rhetoric is “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). Epideictic rhetoric thus tends to be conservative, preserving the status quo and reproducing the dominant discourse.

For a public whose narrative of national invulnerability had withstood even the perils of the nuclear age, the attacks of September 11 came as an incalculable shock. President Bush and other officials responded to the rhetorical demands of the situation by speaking in the epideictic

---

48 When events, even horrific ones, are represented as routine, the consequences for social and political discourse and organization are minimized. While the September 11 attacks were monumental even by the standards of Israel, terrorism is in that polity part of everyday life, and the very routinization of conventional and terrorist security threats has produced a rhetoric of response that is more often deliberative. See Kimmerling 1985.
mode, constructing a narrative that would explain the day’s horrendous events to a shaken public. They identified for the domestic audience the dramatis personae (villain, victim), their chief characteristics (tyrannical, fascistic, evil; free, tolerant, good), and the motivation for the murderous action (hatred) and for the response (righteousness). Relatively little attention was paid, in representing the war on terror, to considerations of pragmatism (what are the net costs of military action, as opposed to other policy instruments?) or justice (what laws have the terrorists violated? for what crime might they be prosecuted? how can they be held legally accountable?). The rhetoric reflected “symbolic reassurance,” not a mastery of policy detail (Murphy 2003; Smith 2005). These official sources were of course hardly the only contributors to the production of the “war on terror,” and indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, President Bush and his inner circle were surprisingly silent. Yet, later that day and over the succeeding weeks, they asserted themselves as the chief authors of the September 11 narrative, and the print and television media, themselves important contributors to the production and reproduction of discourse, hardly deviated from the official line (Bligh et al. 2004; Coe et al. 2004; Hutcheson et al. 2004). The result was “a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information” (Schudson 2002, 41). The Bush administration expended its rhetorical energies primarily on articulating a vision of America and of the values it holds dear.

How speakers speak, what rhetorical mode they employ, plays a significant role in the production of discursive hegemony because it 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 the rhetoric’s core mission of unifying 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).49
After September 11, the epideictic turn made it hard for Democrats to advance and sustain a
coherent hegemonic project of their own with which to counter the Bush administration’s
newfound sense of purpose: they acceded to and played an active part in the production and
reproduction of the discourse of the war on terror.

However, this was not the only epideictic option. The most prominently articulated
alternative, rhetorically structured as a jeremiad, was equally epideictic. Why did prominent
political opponents of the administration not embrace this genre? Situation and rhetorical mode
must be married to institutional position. When 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 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 (Murphy 1992). After the attacks of September 11, prominent national
politicians could in principle have formulated a critique in epideictic terms, but instead they toed
the president’s line, accepting his representation of September 11 and his “justification” for the
war on terror.

49 This was also reflected in a public sentiment that decried even the appearance of partisanship (Corn 2002, 47-49).
Must we turn to this conjuncture of existing discursive formations, historical context, rhetorical mode, and institutional position to explain the dominance of the “war on terror” discourse? Some might find it unsurprising that the political mainstream in the United States settled on the language of prophetic dualism in the wake of the September 11 attacks and that such rhetoric easily triumphed over its more critical competitors. Such a response, they might argue, is only natural: under such circumstances, all leaders would represent the adversary this way. Moreover, given the tendency of populaces to “rally ’round the flag” in times of crisis, such self-affirming rhetorics are expected to prove victorious in the agora.\textsuperscript{50}

Our response to this important objection is threefold. First, the “rally ’round the flag” is generally understood to refer to an evanescent boost in public approval that redounds to the benefit of political leaders in the wake of dramatic international events (Mueller 1973). It is well-established that such rallies are short-lived, and the rally effect has been measured largely in terms of approval ratings (public opinion). It is thus less clear whether it can be extended to the production of (somewhat less fleeting) discursive dominance. More important, underpinning the rally is a desire for identity stability and self-affirmation in times of instability and doubt. This psychological insight would appear to underlie as well the demand for epideictic rhetoric in times of perceived crisis, for such rhetoric (in whatever form) reaffirms national ideals.

Second, even if all people would have “rallied” under such circumstances, it is by no means obvious that they would have rallied \textit{in the same way}: the terms in which policy is legitimated have important consequences. The distinction between Self and Other, and the definition of Self by contrast to some Other, is common (Campbell 1998; Norton 1993 [1988]), and social psychologists aver that it is hard-wired (Tajfel and Turner 1986). But how do we characterize the Other? Civilized or Barbaric? Fundamentally Good, yet flawed or misguided, or irrevocably

\textsuperscript{50} Many thanks to ** for pressing us on this point.
Evil? Secular or Religious? Fascist, Autocratic, or Democratic? Liberal or Illiberal? This article’s premise—one we seek to justify in the next section—is that how we rally, how we represent the Other, is of great import for subsequent political contest. That US leaders turn so readily to the simple binary of good and evil in representing its allies and adversaries has long been noted by, and has long been a source of puzzlement among, Europeans who were skeptical of the US penchant for oversimplification and who prided themselves on their own sophistication. In his analysis of the American “national style” in foreign policy, Stanley Hoffmann suggests that the American proclivity for demonizing the enemy is rooted in the country’s founding by refugees who hoped to escape deep unending disputes in Europe and who sought to build in the New World “a society of concord and consensus.” When faced with irresolvable conflict, Americans “must paint a gruesome picture of the enemy that makes him more diabolical, more effective, more powerful, more insidious than he is. For were the foe anything less, the shame of violence could not be removed” (Hoffmann 1968, 181, 86). Agency is at work here as well: George W. Bush’s steady reliance on “evil” as a central trope has been seen as unusual, even for US presidents, and most would have been surprised if Al Gore, had he been elected president in 2000, had represented the post-9/11 adversary and framed his agenda similarly.

Finally, we have acknowledged that the jeremiad’s prospects in rhetorical contest are often bleak, but neither its marginalization nor its failure is foreordained. In fact, such self-flagellating rhetoric has at times become a major strain in policy debates and has even on occasion become dominant. For example, in the period between the world wars, many politicians in both Britain and France empathized with German moves to jettison the Treaty of Versailles, depicted such revisionism as an understandable response to an overly severe arrangement imposed by the

---

51 Americans of course have looked upon Europeans with equal contempt and at times pity and have congratulated themselves on their moral purity and strength. See Hoffmann 1968, 94-109.
Allies, and blamed themselves for German hostility. The French ambassador to Brussels alleged that France’s “narrow and unintelligent nationalism” was responsible for Hitler’s emergence, and France’s international problems, he claimed, had arisen because “generous and enlightened initiatives … made to Germany were made too late” (Adamthwaite 1995, 187-88).

The rhetoric of guilt was even more palpable in interwar Britain. The British had long charged France with provoking Germany—as Lord Balfour put it in 1925, the French “are so dreadfully afraid of being swallowed up by the tiger, but they spend all their time poking it” (Jacobson 1972, 15)—but many Britons accepted their fair share of the blame for the harshness and consequences of Versailles (Gilbert 1966, 22-31, 56-67, 138-50). The publication in 1919 of John Maynard Keynes’ famous diatribe against the treaty “caused a revolution in British thought… Soon, few educated people could be found to defend the Treaty; many to decry it... Keynes made appeasement public property. His writing became the handbook of reconciliation” (Gilbert 1966, 64-65). Many Britons continued to embrace such “meaculpism” even after Hitler’s election: Lord Lothian, who had helped draft the Treaty of Versailles, was applauded in Nottingham when he characterized the new Nazi regime as “the product of our own conduct in trying to exact impossible reparations and in requiring her [Germany] to be disarmed while her neighbors were armed to the teeth for fifteen years” (Gilbert 1966, 144). When in 1936 Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland, in violation of Versailles and Locarno, the British government was silent, for it had long accepted that the European order was in need of revision. That France and Britain would seek to appease a resurgent Germany was in many ways “overdetermined,” yet this policy was rendered socially sustainable through the rhetoric of the jeremiad.52

52 We do not mean to suggest that French and British leaders really accorded much legitimacy to German grievances. They may have, but it is also possible that this was “mere rhetoric,” masking other motives. What matters for our purposes is that jeremiad-like rhetoric was employed and proved sustainable.
Rhetoric reminiscent of the jeremiad also underpinned the French withdrawal from Algeria. By some accounts, France’s abandonment of its empire in Algeria cannot be explained by military operational difficulties, casualty levels, or economic drain. Rather the French population lost the will to use all means necessary to hold on to Algeria, in large part because of the “moralist critique,” which centered on the brutal tactics (notably torture) employed by French counterinsurgency forces and especially on the danger continued imperial rule posed to France’s democratic order. As the regime, desperate to silence its critics, behaved increasingly despotically at home, allegations of moral corruption resonated more powerfully. Proponents of withdrawal alleged that French democracy was deservedly in jeopardy due to the country’s misguided colonial ventures. Neither the French population nor the authorities tolerated loyalist terrorism in metropolitan France, but they recognized that it was a legacy of French colonialism (Merom 2003, chap. 7-9; Sorum 1977, chap. 5). As the influential editor and intellectual Jean-Marie Domenach wrote at the time, “The war in Algeria will last as long as Frenchmen refuse to satisfy the aspirations of the Algerian people; and as long as the war lasts the Algerian situation will continue to breed fascism” (Domenach 1958, 38-39).

Epideictic rhetoric can play an important role in the production of discursive hegemony, but it cannot sustain policy over the long haul. Eventually, that policy must be defended on other, typically pragmatic, grounds, and deliberation allows for dissent. In fact, as the Bush administration worked to frame Iraq as a “gathering storm,” 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 this development would spark intolerable instability in a region of strategic significance, and that Iraq might share the bomb with terrorists.

53 For alternative accounts—emphasizing variously domestic political coalitions, domestic political institutions, civil-military relations, and De Gaulle’s rhetorical tactics—see Kahler 1984; Lustick 1993; Spruyt 2005.
who could not be deterred. At least in principle, pragmatic justifications can be countered, and the Bush administration’s arguments could, therefore, have faced substantial opposition. Yet many leading Democrats passed up this opportunity to challenge the core of the administration’s claims. Why? We argue that the post-September 11 rhetorical environment narrowed the space for debate over foreign policy and led many Democrats to hold their tongues. Epideictic rhetoric creates the foundation upon which later deliberative argumentation proceeds (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969): 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 loomed, 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. Many Democrats voted against Joint Resolution 114, authorizing the use of armed force against Iraq—a majority in the House, a substantial minority in the Senate—but a large and critical group of Democrats, whose national profiles might have bolstered the opposition to war, shied away from criticizing the popular president who was leading the nation in its war on terror: while a handful jumped enthusiastically on the Iraq bandwagon, many others quietly favored invasion or at most criticized *unilateral* action while otherwise supporting an aggressive posture. Countering the president’s clarion call was seen by these Democrats, some of whom had aspirations to national office, as tantamount to political suicide.54

---

54 Many have suggested that the timing of the resolution’s introduction and vote—before the midterm elections—played a critical role as well (among others, Western 2005a), and that seems quite likely.
Some conservatives began calling for the invasion of Iraq immediately after the September 11 attacks, but the president’s own rhetoric was notably restrained until his 2002 State of the Union address. Following that speech, in which Bush famously (some would say, notoriously) characterized Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as comprising an “axis of evil,” the president’s depiction of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime remained consistent. Hussein 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, Bush and other leading administration figures repeated and reinforced this portrait of Iraq and its regime. In the late summer and early fall of 2002, as the administration launched an aggressive campaign for public opinion, three additional elements were grafted on to 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, the administration did not waver from these core arguments.

55 Within two weeks, William Safire announced that “a clear link” had been established between Osama bin Laden and “the America-hater,” Saddam Hussein (Safire 2001).
56 This conclusion is based on a careful reading of every presidential address related to Iraq between September 2001 and March 2003, located in PPP.
57 Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 29 January 2002, PPP.
59 See, for example, George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Iraq, 17 March 2003, 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 (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005), forged more durable bonds between the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein, and the war on terror. By regularly referring to Iraq as a member of the “axis of evil” and portraying Saddam Hussein as “evil,” Bush and key administration spokespeople suggested that the Iraqi regime and its president were on the same moral plane as the terrorists and probably were themselves terrorists. By emphasizing that the Iraqi regime killed its own civilians, the administration 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. Terrorism threatens the
very logic of inside/outside that sustains the modern nation-state, and states consequently respond by asserting anew their territorial identity, reimposing a geopolitics of identity and difference, and emphasizing the primacy of territorial defense (Coleman 2004, 88-93). As Americans daily reproduced this statist counterterrorist discourse, it seemed natural to posit close links between Al Qaeda and a state sponsor, as the administration regularly insinuated. Not any state could have been reasonably inserted into that role, but 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 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. “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

---

60 See also Keohane 2002.
61 Moreover, other conceivable candidates—such as Afghanistan and Sudan—were not sufficiently state-like to sustain allegations that they had facilitated the attacks’ remarkable coordination. Thanks to ** for this observation.
62 See, among many others, Remarks, Fundraising Luncheon for Gubernatorial Candidate Clayton Williams (Dallas, TX), 15 October 1990; Remarks, Republican Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, VT) 23 October 1990; Remarks, Republican Party Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, MA) 1 November 1990; Remarks, Republican Campaign Rally (Albuquerque, NM), 3 November 1990—all in PPP.
63 This is of course not to deny that other leaders have competed for that dubious honor: Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, among others.
named Saddam Hussein the most evil statesman of the 20th century (36%) as named Hitler (43%). 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 Baathist Iraq with Nazi Germany did not taper off much during the 1990s. In 1998 Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, called Saddam Hussein “the most evil man the world has seen since Hitler” (Bennet 1998), and this portrait of Iraq’s president became so embedded in popular American discourse that, in “person on the street” interviews conducted that same year, citizens based their analysis of Iraq on the Hitler analogy (Wilgoren 1998). Saddam Hussein’s credentials as a figure of imposing 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 Bush alluded to Hitler’s perfidy and past Western errors in March 2003: in issuing a final ultimatum, he argued that “in the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators… In this century … a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this Earth.”

Representing Saddam Hussein as a pathetic petty tyrant, as one who aspired to be Hitler but lacked the competence or the resources, was an option available to anti-war forces, but it flew in the face of over a decade’s worth of rhetoric that had treated Iraq as a serious threat to national security and that had personalized that threat in the Hitler-like figure of Saddam Hussein.

The second rhetorical engine driving the case for war in 2002-2003 was that Saddam Hussein and his regime were terrorists, and this depiction also found support in the rhetoric of the Clinton

---

64 West Virginia Poll, 23 January 1991 (available through Polling the Nations, poll.orspub.com).
65 See also O'Driscoll 1998.
66 Address to the Nation on Iraq, 17 March 2003, PPP. On the inappropriateness of the Hitler analogy, see Weinberg 2002; for a defense, see Berman 2004, esp. chap. 4.
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 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 was an appropriate use of the terrorism label 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 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 him of “harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, the instruments of mass death and destruction.” This ingrained articulation of Hussein to terrorism sustained the suggestion that his regime was somehow responsible for September 11 and undercut Democrats who might have opposed the war.

These two well-established themes assisted the Bush administration immensely as it sought to build domestic support for war. Saddam Hussein was a second Hitler whose appetite for 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. Like Hitler and like the terrorists who committed appalling atrocities in the service of political ends, Saddam Hussein was unquestionably evil. As 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

---

67 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.
68 See Broad and Miller 1998; Erlanger 1998; Sennott 1995a; Sennott 1995b; Weiner 1993.
69 “The Iraqi Threat” (Cincinnati, OH), 7 October 2002, PPP.
equally as evil and equally as destructive.”\footnote{Remarks prior to Discussions with President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and an Exchange With Reporters, 25 September 2002, \textit{PPP}.} 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 muted. True, 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.\footnote{The overall vote was 77-23 in the Senate, and 296-133 in the House of Representatives. Some have suggested to us that Democrats who voted for the resolution might have thought they were authorizing coercive diplomacy, not war (thanks to ** for raising this point). This seems to us implausible for two reasons. First, Democratic opponents of the resolution argued that it would provide the president with a blank check for war, and Republican supporters publicly maintained that UN support was unlikely to be forthcoming and that the United States would likely have little choice but to go it alone (see \textit{Congressional Record}, 3-10 October 2002). Some Democrats may have hoped that the resolution would help resolve the conflict short of war, by persuading Saddam Hussein of US resolve, but they understood the resolution’s implications if Hussein did not concede. Second, Senate Democratic leaders (including Joseph Biden and Tom Daschle) had tried, but failed, to limit the resolution’s military objectives to disarming the Iraqi regime. Bush insisted on and was granted an expansive and open-ended authority to use force, and thus Democrats who voted in favor of the measure knew full well they were endorsing a war of great scope.} But nearly all leading Democratic figures and particularly the front runners for the presidential nomination did support the war in its essence, even if some took issue with the details (Hess 2006, 106-11; Western 2005a). At the leadership level, there was by the summer of 2002 “broad bipartisan support for ousting” Saddam Hussein by “a military invasion if other options fail” (Dao 2002): in other words, by the summer before the war, the question of Saddam Hussein’s removal was, even among Democrats, not if, but when and how. Party leaders made it “very hard,” according to Senator Dianne Feinstein, for lower-ranking Democrats to speak out against the war. A “rift” reportedly emerged between the party leadership and prospective presidential candidates, on the one hand, and rank-and-file Democrats on the other, and the rift was even greater between Beltway Democrats and the core Democratic constituency outside Washington. Opponents of the
war, both inside and outside Congress, were placed “on the defensive” (Traub 2004; VandeHei 2002b; VandeHei and Eilperin 2002a).

Part of the reason for the relative silence among this critical group of leading Democrats lies in the rhetorical obstacles imposed after September 11. The establishment of the war on terror as the organizing discourse in foreign policy, in combination with the existing portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, deprived them of socially sustainable alternative arguments upon which they might have relied to oppose the administration. In short, these Democrats had been “rhetorically coerced”: they had been left without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal. What they could do—and what they did—was raise questions about the timing and circumstances of an invasion. The boundaries of sustainable rhetoric had been narrowed after September 11, limiting the space for vocal opposition.

Such “rhetorical coercion” was possible because of two key facts of social life. First, politics may entail coercion or distribution, but at the same time it involves the struggle over meanings. Thus political actors can rarely take tangible steps or advance policy positions without justifying those stances and behaviors—in short, without framing. The effort to forge intersubjective meaning implicates some audience in the process, in whose eyes rhetorical contestants continually strive to legitimate their positions (Perelman 1982). Second, and related, speakers may not say just anything they would like in the public arena: rhetoric is not infinitely elastic but is structured. Every community of discourse shares a number of rhetorical commonplaces that both enable and constrain speakers’ rhetorical possibilities (Shotter 1993, 170-71). Reimagining, reformulating, and reshaping a rhetorical universe is a long-term project that requires an unusual level of commitment. Substantial rhetorical innovation requires long time horizons, and most political actors operate in the moment. In a given contentious episode—such as the run-up to war
with Iraq—political actors generally utilize rhetorical tools drawn from a tool chest that is, in the short term, effectively fixed (Swidler 1986). Commonplaces might be woven together in creative ways, but political actors are not free to deploy utterly alien formulations in the course of contestation.72

What arguments did Democrats offer, and why did they make little headway? First, a small number of Democrats, some quite prominent in the party, opposed an invasion of Iraq from the very beginning, arguing that the status quo was tolerable and sustainable.73 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). He, along with Senator Robert Byrd, accused the administration of pushing for war so as to divert the nation’s attention from the faltering economy and the rash of corporate corruption scandals with ties to the White House. 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.74 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

72 Space constraints prevent us from presenting the theoretical logic of rhetorical coercion in greater detail. For more on this mechanism, see Krebs 2006; Krebs and Jackson 2007.

73 The most prominent among these early opponents—Senators Robert Byrd, Carl Levin, and Edward Kennedy—are the exceptions that prove the rule: old lions of the party, they could speak freely because they held secure seats and harbored no aspirations for national office.

74 This was apparently the view, before the war, among many military officers: see Ricks 2002. For an academic endorsement of containment, even of a nuclear-armed Iraq, see Mearsheimer and Walt 2003.
view of evil might have been sustained before September 11, it was unsustainable afterwards.\textsuperscript{75} 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.\textsuperscript{76}

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. Senator Mark Dayton claimed that “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.” Representative Nancy Pelosi, however, maintained that “as the

\textsuperscript{75} The two other members of the “axis of evil” have escaped similar punishment—at least for now. Many have speculated that Iraq was targeted first because it was low-hanging fruit, and there is some evidence that the Bush administration has given serious consideration to bombing strikes against Iran (Hersh 2006); North Korea, widely believed to already have nuclear weapons and within striking distance of Seoul and Tokyo, is the hardest nut to crack. Labeling another state evil or terroristic does not necessitate intervention, but it does make it awfully hard to oppose one once it is on the agenda. We cannot know of course what would have happened if the administration had sought first to make the case for war against Iran or North Korea.

\textsuperscript{76} 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.
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 it sought to some extent 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.

In the post–September 11 rhetorical space, Democratic politicians who might normally have helped lead a vigorous opposition to the invasion 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

---

77 “Senate to Debate Iraq Resolution.”
78 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.
79 Western (2005, 197-198) similarly, if briefly, suggests that Bush’s framing of the war “boxed in” opponents.
80 One might tell the story of the road to war in Iraq through the lens of the public’s predispositions regarding the use of force in general and against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in particular (Thrall 2006; Western 2005a). Such predispositions were undoubtedly important in shaping the opinion baseline with regard to the war, but we offer two observations in response. First, this argument seems complementary. Such predispositions were themselves partly the product of representations of Saddam Hussein and of the Iraqi threat since the first Gulf War, which figure
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 it particularly constraining to the Bush administration, which co-opted such selective multilateralist critiques by recasting the issue: would the United Nations uphold its own previously articulated commitment to shut down Iraqi WMD and ballistic missile programs (Western 2005a, 201-06)? The administration also 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.81

Other motivations may certainly have played a role as well in these Democrats’ relative silence: our account centered on rhetorical coercion does not deny the existence of other relevant motives and political calculi. Most important, at least since the Vietnam War, Democrats have

---

81 There is substantial debate over whether public support for military operations is driven more by success or by cost, specifically casualties. For the former view, see Feaver and Gelpi 2004; for the latter view, see Mueller 1973. For this debate in the context of the Iraq War, see Gelpi, et al. 2005/06; Mueller 2005a.
been portrayed as, and considered, weak on defense and national security, and thus it is conceivable that many leading Democrats jumped on the administration’s bandwagon, even half-heartedly, to avoid being characterized as soft on the war on terror.\footnote{Nor did they prove wrong, as Republican candidates, as well as President Bush, made political hay out of Democrats’ positions on the war (see, among many others, VandeHei 2002a). For a particularly incisive account of how this reputation shaped the stances of Democratic presidential candidates, see Traub 2004.} Indeed, by some accounts, nearly every Democrat facing a tough reelection campaign voted for Joint Resolution 114, and all the leading Democratic presidential contenders in Congress, with the exception of Senator Bob Graham, voted for the resolution (and even those outside Congress typically lent it their endorsement) (VandeHei and Eilperin 2002b). This was certainly the conventional wisdom in Washington, and thus, just before the resolution came up for vote, some predicted that two-thirds or more of House and Senate Democrats would fall into line (VandeHei and Eilperin 2002a). They were consequently surprised when a majority of Democrats in the House and a substantial minority in the Senate voted against the resolution—despite long-standing Democratic sensitivity to this perception and despite the vote coming just weeks before the 2002 midterm elections (VandeHei and Eilperin 2002b). Nevertheless, this motivation seems plausible, if only because it was so widely bandied about from the summer of 2002 through the spring of 2003.

Democratic politicians undoubtedly possessed varied reasons for withholding vigorous criticism of the administration’s plans for war in Iraq. We do not have access to internal memos that might lay out the logic underlying these politicians’ positions, and even these documents might very well be strategically framed, undermining their value for revealing “real motives.” Since we cannot here—and probably no research can definitively—establish what motives were in fact paramount, our purpose has been more modest: to establish the plausibility of an account centered on rhetorical coercion. Yet we believe that rhetorical coercion is an essential piece of the story, even in “straightforward” accounts of anticipated political punishment for opposing the
war. Had arguments against removing Saddam Hussein from power by military means been socially sustainable, opposition to the war would not have been politically costly. The combination of existing discursive formations (Iraq as terrorist state, Iraq as personified in Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein as Hitler revisited) with the post–September 11 war on terror discourse narrowed the space for sustainable political debate. To have opposed the very goals of the war in Iraq would have seemed to have tossed in the towel in the unquestioned war on terror, and to have opposed the pursuit of the larger end because of a dispute over the (unilateral military) means would have seemed to misplace one’s priorities.

**Conclusion**

As the war in Iraq festers, as the deaths of American soldiers climb above the two thousand mark, and as the number of Iraqi civilians killed tops 35 thousand, understanding how such a situation arose is of great import. For those 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—albeit one that has been relegated to secondary standing in a project motivated by and framed around a singular empirical puzzle. As the scholarly literature over the origins of the Iraq War reveals, talk unquestionably matters in the making of foreign policy. Structural realist approaches, which derive foreign policy from international systemic imperatives, are not sustainable because they are insensitive to domestic politics in general and to the rhetorical dimensions of foreign policy in particular.
Approaches that break open the “black box” of the state have more promise, but they are incomplete, we have argued, without attention to the social processes that legitimate policy alternatives. There is a consensus that the Bush administration’s capacity to control the terms of the debate over Iraq was of critical importance to the outcome, but rhetorical contest cannot be straightforwardly reduced to material power or institutional position. We cannot fully make sense of the path to war in Iraq in particular and of politics in general without greater attention to the dynamics of rhetoric itself. Yet our understanding of how and when articulations become dominant and how and when they might be effectively resisted is impoverished. 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.

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 Hussein as a terrorist—the burden of proof fell on those who would oppose extending that war to Iraq. Potential opponents were rhetorically hemmed in, unable to offer a case against an aggressive policy or even the immediacy of the threat.
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 all Democratic presidential candidates were 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. 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 have caused Bush’s approval rating to plummet, and increasingly Americans are endorsing the view that the Iraq War was not justified in the first place and that, even if it was, the United States is now doing more harm than good and should withdraw. The space for a vocal opposition is growing. 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.\footnote{Challenging hegemony is never easy, even when the structural conditions are right. The disruption of hegemony requires the bold exercise of agency.} Challenging hegemony is never easy, even when the structural conditions are right. The disruption of hegemony requires the bold exercise of agency.

\footnote{For a related observation, in the context of the 2004 election, see Traub 2004. For specific suggestions about what an opposition hegemonic project would look like, well beyond the “war on terror,” see Lakoff 2004; Tomasky 2006.}
References


Fixing the Meaning of September 11


