

# No Shades of Gray: The Binary Discourse of George W. Bush and an Echoing Press

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*Binary communications represent the world as a place of polar opposites. Such conceptions of reality, although not uncommon in Western thought, take on a heightened importance when political leaders employ them in a concerted, strategic discourse in a mass media environment. With this in mind, this research offers a conception of binary discourse and uses this as a foundation to examine (a) the use of binaries by U.S. President George W. Bush in 15 national addresses, from his inauguration in January 2001 to commencement of the Iraq War in March 2003, and (b) the responses of editorials in 20 leading U.S. newspapers to the president's communications.*

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush became the unchallenged leading voice of American government. In a remarkably short period of time, the president evolved from a politician routinely mocked for his linguistic shortcomings to one hailed for his “steel and eloquence” (“Bush Exudes Strength,” 2001). This transformation occurred in full public view, as Bush spoke several times to national television audiences in the weeks following September 11. Perhaps the most important of these communications was his national address before a joint session of the U.S. Congress on September 20, during which the president declared, “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush, 2001b). This statement had clear rhetorical power at the time and has subsequently become something even more important—the foundational policy of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism.” As the president said in October 2002, “The doctrine that says, ‘Either you’re with us or with the enemy,’ still holds. It’s an important doctrine. It’s as important today as it was 13 months ago” (Bush, 2002b).

This declaration by the U.S. president is notable for one other reason—it is an archetypal example of an either/or construction of reality. As we will discuss,

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such binary constructions are ideally suited for a U.S. political culture dominated by mass media; that is, binaries well fit the dominant norms of news construction, making it likely that a political leader's use of them would be echoed in press coverage. With this in mind, we offer a conception of *binary discourse* and use this framework to examine the president's national addresses between September 11, 2001, and commencement of the Iraq War in March 2003, and the response of the press to these communications. This period is a rich context for this analysis for two reasons: (a) the administration, U.S. Congress, and public faced several weighty decisions over these months, and (b) the president's public communications were a constant presence that could not be ignored by other political actors, given the president's continually healthy public approval ratings (Pew, 2003).

### **Binary Discourse, Political Strategy, and September 11**

The tendency in Western thought to construct reality in binary terms has been studied under a variety of headings, including binary (Altman & Nakayama, 1991; Derrida, 1972/1981), dichotomy (Prokhovnik, 1999), dualism (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992), dialectic (Burke, 1945/1969), and polarization (King & Anderson, 1971; Raum & Measell, 1974). A common thread in these conceptions is that Western language and thought often represent the world as dichotomized absolutes consisting of antithetical terms and ideas, with no alternative ground. We use the term binary to refer to this general practice and draw upon Burke (1945/1969) to define such constructions: "The placement of one thought or thing in terms of its opposite" (p. 403). Notably, binary conceptions of reality have consequences. Specifically, scholars have argued that binaries inherently engender and reinforce unequal relations among objects. For example, Derrida (1972/1981) contended that binaries do not have a "peaceful coexistence," but rather exist as a "violent hierarchy" in which "one term governs the other . . . or has the upper hand" (p. 41). Similarly, Carr and Zanetti (1999) argued that binaries connote "a struggle for predominance" that powerfully suggests that "if one position is right, then the other must be wrong" (p. 324).

We build upon this work with the argument that such constructions gain great political importance when employed within a strategic discourse that contains three attributes seemingly present in the Bush administration's post-September 11 communications. First, a binary discourse requires a *central organizing object* that provides a foundational meaning to the surrounding language and emphases. This object might be a behavior (e.g., abortion), an idea (e.g., communism), or an event (e.g., September 11), but must resonate with the audience at whom communications are directed; that is, the audience must have strong beliefs and an interpretation perceived as widely shared about the object. In particular, objects commonly conceived in moral terms seem likely to serve as effective central organizing objects because such issues tend to be evaluated at "gut level" (Carmines & Stimson, 1980) and are useful in mobilizing social and political action (Glendon, 1991; Monroe & Maher, 1995). Communism, for example, served as an organizing object throughout the Cold War. When this ended, however, "American presidents

were left without a consensual definition of international relations" (Stuckey, 1995, p. 225). Indeed, scholarship indicates that post-Cold War presidents have struggled to employ the type of binary-rich language that had been so effective prior to its end (Kuypers, 1997; Stuckey, 1995). The September 11 attacks provided an organizing object that, we suggest, President Bush centrally employed in a strategic binary discourse. With this in mind, we expected the president to have regularly referenced the attacks in his national addresses.

Second, a binary discourse is likely to unfold through a particular *ordering of discourse* that consists of two phases occurring over time. Specifically, a binary discourse must have an establishment phase, during which a speaker does two things: (a) initiates or substantially increases the usage of binaries, and (b) employs the binaries in a rhetorically notable manner, such as via memorable phrasing. These tactics establish the binary: The former emphasizes the importance of the ideas and the latter encourages their cultural circulation, in particular, in media coverage. Once the discourse has been established, it can be extended over time in two ways. First, a speaker can periodically repeat (or nearly so) the binary constructions. This approach has strategic limits, however, because the rhetorical weight of such presentations almost certainly diminishes if they become omnipresent. Another method to sustain a binary discourse is to consistently highlight the concepts on either side of the binary as time passes. Emphasis on these themes subsumes the binary constructions and, because such themes "derive their significance from their relation to opposite terms" (Burke, 1945/1969, p. 408), is likely adequate to evoke the full binary once it has been effectively established with elevated usage and memorable phrasing. There are risks, then, in each of these approaches to sustaining a binary over time; as a result, a speaker with much at stake might be expected to employ them in an interdependent manner, providing both occasional repetition of the original binary and more subtle emphasis on each of the opposing sides of the binary. This is what we expected from President Bush between autumn 2001 and spring 2003.

Finally, a binary discourse utilizes *multiple binary constructions*. Although a single binary has significant rhetorical power, multiple binaries allow a speaker to make strategic decisions and respond to multiple exigencies, such as emphasis upon a particular binary to fit a specific need or, conversely, employment of several at once to fortify a position. We posited that in the weeks and months after September 11 President Bush employed two Cold War-tested binaries: good/evil and security/peril. As Medhurst (2000) noted, "The discourse of cold war pictured a Manichean world of light and darkness, with no shades of gray. Communism was a demonic force unalterably opposed to all that was good" (p. 465). This good/evil binary was accompanied by the dualistic language of "Soviet threat," which Ivie (1990) labeled the "prevailing image" of Cold War communications, and U.S. national security (Campbell, 1992; Dalby, 1990). Use of these binaries after September 11 benefited the president in several ways.

First, because binaries can serve the function of "unification by a foe shared in common" (Burke, 1945/1969, p. 408), utilization of these two likely helped to unify the U.S. public—initially against terrorists and then against Saddam Hussein. If, as Ivie (1990) argued, Americans "traditionally have exonerated themselves of

any guilt for war . . . by decivilizing the image of their adversaries” (p. 119), then characterization of Americans as good and terrorists and Saddam as evil and threatening may have helped to assuage potential guilt among Americans over U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. Second, use of these binaries helped to link the post-September 11 military campaigns to previous moments in U.S. history in which an enemy was more clearly defined (e.g., World War II) and American moral certitude was unchallenged, a particularly relevant concern for the war in Iraq, which marked the nation’s first foray into a preemptive foreign policy. Third, these two binaries operated well together. Both have great moral power, but security/peril avoided the obvious religious foundations of good/evil. Further, good/evil initially was important to shape Americans’ interpretation of the September 11 attacks, whereas security/peril aligned closely with the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” policy goals—especially the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the push toward the Iraq War. We expected, then, that the president regularly utilized both of these binaries between autumn 2001 and spring 2003.

### **Binary Discourse in a Mass Media Environment**

The strategic value of a binary discourse is rooted, in part, in its ideal fit for a U.S. political culture dominated by mass media. This is so for several reasons. First, binary oppositions inherently suggest competition between two forces—exactly the sort of conflict that makes for a good news story (see Patterson, 1994; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Second, binaries are stylistically pleasing and therefore supply media outlets with the pithy sound bites that they desire. Third, binary concepts almost without exception have moral power, which gives them both a resonance with the mass public and a sustaining news value. At the same time, scholarship (e.g., Billeaudeau, Domke, Hutcheson, & Garland, 2003; Bloom, 1990; Zaller, 1994a; Zaller & Chiu, 1996) has indicated that news coverage and public opinion are especially attuned to the views of political elites during times of national crisis—such as September 11. For example, Zaller’s (1994a) claim that, during crises, “national unity is good politics” (p. 267) might be adapted to suggest that national unity is good business for news media during such times. One way in which the press might show national unity is through a close alignment of perspectives with government leaders. For example, Fox News Channel, which was accused by some (e.g., Rutenberg, 2001) of overly patriotic coverage post-September 11, experienced significant ratings increases between autumn 2001 and spring 2003, ending 2002 ahead of CNN and receiving the highest ratings in its history during the Iraq War (Getlin, 2003; Lowry, 2003). In short, news media clearly have economic motivations to align with government leaders in times of crisis. As Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, and Garland (2004) put it, “A commercial press, by definition, will always be a patriotic press when the nation is threatened” (p. 47).

One particularly important arena of media discourse to examine for such potential alignment with the president is that of newspaper editorials. Scholars con-

tend that editorial boards have a central role in interpreting events (Huckin, 2002; Vermeer, 2002), often serving as a source of “opinion leadership” for both citizens and members of Congress (Powlick, 1995; Schaefer, 1997). Indeed, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) found that partisan cues in newspaper editorials, more than such cues in news content, influenced public views about presidential candidates. It seems important, therefore, to consider how editorial boards—as the institutional voices of the press—responded to the president’s communications. Situated uniquely as key opinion leaders for both citizens and political leaders, editorial boards were likely to have been sensitive to both the patriotic sentiment and heightened security concerns that arose following the terrorist attacks. All of this increased the likelihood that news media generally, and newspaper editorials in particular, aligned closely with President Bush’s communications after September 11; thus, we expected that if the president employed a binary discourse, editorials followed suit.

### **Method**

To test these expectations, we first analyzed 15 major addresses by the president, beginning chronologically with his inauguration on January 20, 2001, and ending with his March 17, 2003, ultimatum to Saddam Hussein as a prelude to the Iraq War. We then examined editorials from 20 major U.S. newspapers on the 2 days following each of these addresses.

Presidential texts were compiled in two steps. First, from the National Archives and Records Administration’s *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, a comprehensive collection of presidential public communications, all “addresses to the nation” were retrieved, with one exception: The president’s brief address the evening of space shuttle Columbia’s explosion was excluded because of its brevity and narrow scope. Two more addresses were then added: the president’s remarks at the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001, and his address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 12, 2002. The former was included because it occurred close to the attacks, its content ranged beyond a basic eulogy (unlike the Columbia address), and it was televised by broadcast and cable networks. The latter, also nationally televised, was included because of its significance in the buildup to the Iraq War—it was the first time that the president publicly articulated his desire to gain international support and remove Saddam Hussein.

Editorials that ran during the 2 days following each address were collected from 20 U.S. newspapers, selected because they are leading news outlets and offer geographic diversity.<sup>1</sup> Editorials were retrieved from the Nexis database by

<sup>1</sup> Content was retrieved from the following newspapers: *Albuquerque Journal*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Daily News* (New York), *Denver Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *Omaha World-Herald*, *Oregonian* (Portland), *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Tampa Tribune*, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), and *Washington Post*.

the search string of “editorial and (Bush or president)” in the headline, lead paragraph, or key terms. Content that referred to presidents other than Bush was discarded, leaving 288 editorials.

The unit of analysis for presidential addresses was the paragraph; that is, each binary category (discussed below) received one coding per paragraph. We followed the paragraph breaks present in the addresses. This coding allowed identification of not just the presence of the binary concepts but also their prevalence in each address, so that emphases over time could be tracked. For newspaper editorials the unit of analysis was the entire editorial. We chose this rather than the paragraph because of the general brevity of editorials as well as their common focus on specific topics or themes. In addition, collection of editorials across 20 newspapers provided confidence that we would capture any meaningful shifts in editorial discourse.

Presidential paragraphs and editorials were first coded for the presence of “complete” binaries—that is, when both sides were present and situated in such a manner that the antithetical nature of the terms was apparent. Often the terms were placed in the same sentence; in other cases, the terms were positioned together within a broader thought expression that nonetheless anchored the ideas as oppositional. This coding was derived from these definitions:

*Good/Evil.* This binary was considered present if the term *good*, or similar terms characterizing a moral goodness such as right, righteous, light, best, just, great, or honorable, were set in opposition to the term *evil*, or other similarly connotative terms such as wrong, dark, worst, unjust, cruel, sadistic, wicked, ruthless, or barbaric. Traditional “American values” adapted from Hutcheson et al. (2004) were also coded as good because of President Bush’s usage of these values as inherently good. These values included freedom, life, liberty, democracy, justice, and innovation. Contrasts to “American values,” such as the phrase “enemies of freedom,” were thus coded as evil, as was the term “fear,” which the president often placed in opposition to the value of freedom.

*Security/Peril.* This binary was considered present if the term *security*, or similar terms such as safety, protection, and safeguard, were set in opposition to the term *peril*, or similar terms such as threat, risk, danger, and hazard. References to potential future attacks also were coded as peril because of the inherent peril that existed with such a possibility. Notably, security was coded when it appeared in mention of the Office or Department of Homeland Security because the Office, then Department of Homeland Security emerged in response to September 11, so these institutional titles must be viewed as part of the security discourse.

Three additional codings were undertaken. First, presidential paragraphs and editorials were coded for any reference to either side of the binaries, which allowed tracking of emphasis on these themes in presidential addresses and newspaper editorials over time. Second, for presidential paragraphs, we coded references to the September 11 attacks. Finally, whether the binaries were criticized in editorials was coded because it was possible that editorials would both (a) use the language of the president and (b) be critical of such discourse. Any criticism in editorials of either side of the binaries was identified.

One person analyzed the addresses and newspaper editorials. As a check of

intercoder reliability, a second person coded approximately 10% of presidential paragraphs and 10% of editorials. For presidential paragraphs, both the good/evil binary and the security/peril binary yielded an intercoder reliability coefficient of 1.0. For editorials, the good/evil binary yielded an intercoder reliability coefficient of .97, which was .94 after controlling for agreement by chance (see Scott, 1955), and the security/peril binary yielded an intercoder reliability coefficient of .93, .86 after controlling for chance. Coding of references to either side of the binaries yielded an intercoder reliability coefficient of .97 for presidential paragraphs, .94 after controlling for agreement by chance. For editorials, this coding yielded an intercoder reliability coefficient of .96, .92 after controlling for agreement by chance. Intercoder reliability was 1.0 for presidential references to September 11 and 1.0 for any editorial criticism of the binary concepts.

## **Results**

As an initial step, we examined whether the president commonly referenced the terrorist attacks of September 11. We have suggested that these events provided a central organizing object for the president's binary discourse; if so, he should have consistently referred to September 11 over time. Indeed, the president referred to these events at least twice in all but two postattack addresses: He mentioned September 11 only once when announcing military action in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, and not at all in his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein on March 17, 2003. This omission was a notable exception, we will argue later. This evidence, then, is suggestive of the importance of September 11 in the president's discourse.

With this in mind, we turn to analysis of the good/evil and security/peril binaries in the president's discourse and in newspaper editorials, presenting evidence according to the theorized phases of this discourse.

### *Establishment Phase*

Within 9 days of the terrorist attacks, President Bush addressed the nation three times, culminating with his September 20 address to a joint session of Congress that drew 82 million U.S. viewers, the year's largest television audience save the Super Bowl ("For ABC, A Winning Season," 2001). This address symbolically closed the first phase of the post-September 11 world. As the *Omaha World-Herald* put it, "George W. Bush's speech of Sept. 20, 2001 . . . was, perhaps, the end of this beginning" (September 22, 2001). The president did not address the nation again until he announced military action in Afghanistan nearly 3 weeks later. These three addresses, then, might be viewed as the potential "establishment phase" of a binary discourse. Accordingly, we expected that Bush initiated or increased his usage of the good/evil and security/peril binaries during this period, in order to firmly establish these in U.S. political discourse. With this in mind, we ran crosstabs comparing the presence of each binary in the president's three national addresses prior to the attacks to their presence in the three addresses in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. We then ran parallel crosstabs to examine the discourse in newspaper editorials after the same addresses. Results of these analyses are

**Table 1. “Good/Evil” and “Security/Peril” Binaries by President George W. Bush and in Newspaper Editorials**

Time period	“Good/Evil” binary			
	George W. Bush		Editorials	
	Absent	Present	Absent	Present
Before September 11	97.6% (n = 125)	2.4%	98.3% (n = 59)	1.7%
After September 11	92.5% (n = 80)	7.5%	71.4% (n = 56)	28.6%
	X <sup>2</sup> = 3.0, df = 1, p = .08		X <sup>2</sup> = 16.5, df = 1, p < .05	

Time period	“Security/Peril” binary			
	George W. Bush		Editorials	
	Absent	Present	Absent	Present
Before September 11	99.2% (n = 125)	0.8%	96.6% (n = 59)	3.4%
After September 11	95.0% (n = 80)	5.0%	85.7% (n = 56)	14.3%
	X <sup>2</sup> = 3.6, df = 1, p = .06		X <sup>2</sup> = 4.3, df = 1, p < .05	

Note. Numbers in table indicate, for the particular time period, the percentage of (a) paragraphs in the president’s national addresses and (b) newspaper editorials in the 2 days following addresses, that contained good/evil or security/peril binaries

shown in Table 1. These results supported expectations. Several points merit emphasis. First, the president’s use of both binaries increased significantly after the terrorist attacks: 2.4% of presidential paragraphs prior to September 11 contained the good/evil binary compared to 7.5% in the three addresses following the attacks, while usage of the security/peril binary increased from 0.8% of presidential paragraphs to 5.0% after the attacks. Second, newspaper editorials echoed the president’s usage of these binaries: 1.7% of editorials prior to September 11 contained the good/evil binary, compared to 28.6% of editorials afterward, while emphasis on security/peril increased from 3.4% to 14.3% after the attacks. A third point highlights the relative usage of the binaries: Good/evil received greater emphasis than security/peril in both the president’s addresses and newspaper editorials after the attacks, suggesting that good/evil was the more important binary at the time. In sum, the president and newspaper editorials became much more likely to emphasize these binaries in the immediate aftermath of September 11.

These results suggest that these national addresses marked the establishment phase of a strategic binary discourse by President Bush. If so, we also would expect the president to have employed the binaries in a rhetorically notable man-

ner. He did just that, particularly with good/evil. Early in his address on the evening of the attacks, Bush said, "Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America" (Bush, 2001a). On September 20, before Congress and a national television audience, the president declared, "Freedom and fear are at war." Several paragraphs later, he reiterated this message, this time invoking a higher power to highlight his point that the United States was engaged in a battle between good and evil: "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them" (Bush, 2001b). The president's language invoking the security/peril binary was less dramatic, a point to which we will return later, but nonetheless clear. On the evening of September 11, he said, "Our first priority is to get help to those who have been injured and to take every precaution to protect our citizens at home and around the world from further attacks." Nine days later, before Congress and the American public, the president elevated his rhetoric: "Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans."

Editorials during this establishment period followed the president's use of these binaries, often repeating his words. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted that "George W. Bush has cast the war against international terrorism as a fight that pits 'good vs. evil.'" The newspaper went on to agree with the president's characterization: "There are times and issues when right and wrong are colored in shades of gray, when men and women of good conscience may differ. This is not one of them" (September 16, 2001). Similarly, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* echoed the president's dominant theme: "President George W. Bush gave the most powerful and important presidential speech in a generation Thursday night, summoning Americans and all the citizens of the civilized world to a war between 'freedom and fear'" (September 21, 2001). The security/peril binary also was present in editorials. For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* opined:

Americans have had something of a charmed existence . . . [that] created an illusion of invulnerability. Americans did not really get an in-your-face reminder of the dangers of the modern world until they traveled to countries where security can be an everyday obsession and no one thinks twice about the sight of an officer with a machine gun strapped on his shoulder. (September 12, 2001)

And the *Washington Post* offered this sentiment:

What we can hope to achieve, over time, is not total victory but far greater mastery over the threat of terrorism. . . . It will take also a relentless pursuit of known terrorist networks; a strict insistence on holding every country accountable for its support or tolerance of violent extremists; and a strengthening and redesign of intelligence and security systems. (September 16, 2001)

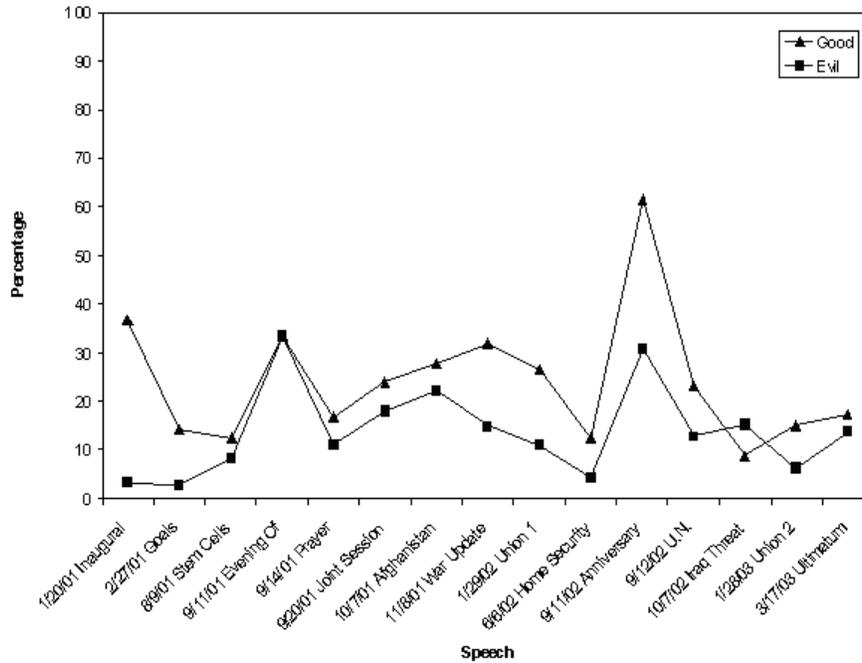


Figure 1. Percentage of “good” and “evil” discourse in Bush speeches by paragraph.

Notably, the newspaper editorials contained no criticism of the president’s usage of these binaries during this phase.

The pattern of findings, then, suggests that in the days immediately following the September 11 attacks President Bush established a binary discourse that featured good/evil and security/peril and that editorials echoed this discourse.

*Extension Phase*

We have theorized that once a binary discourse is established, it can be extended over time in two ways: by occasionally repeating (or nearly so) the binary constructions and by highlighting the concepts on either side of the binary. These interdependent approaches, if done in a consistent manner, would continue to evoke the binaries, emphasize their importance, and encourage their cultural circulation. We examined, then, whether President Bush utilized these tactics after the post-September 11 establishment of the binaries.

The data reveal that the president continued to occasionally employ both of the binaries. Specifically, at least one good/evil binary was present in each of the nine addresses that followed the establishment phase: The number ranged from five in the November 8, 2001, update on the “war on terrorism” and four in both the 2002 State of the Union and the address to the United Nations regarding Iraq on September 12, 2002, to one in four addresses spread out over time. The security/peril

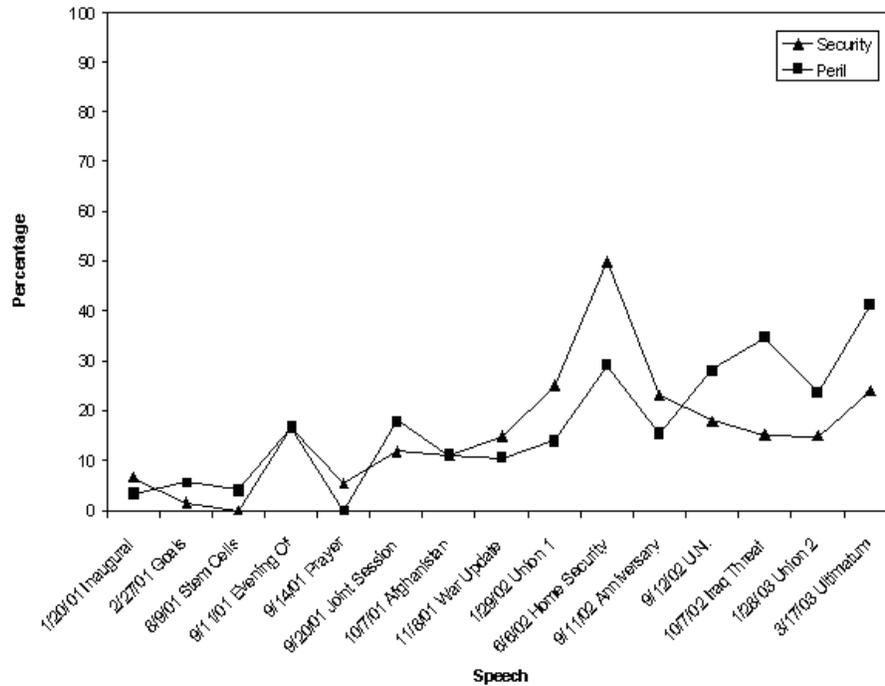


Figure 2. Percentage of “security” and “peril” discourse in Bush speeches by paragraph.

binary was absent during the military campaign in Afghanistan but then returned in the 2002 State of the Union and thereafter generally remained high (three or more per address), with one instance in which security/peril was absent—the president’s brief address on the 2002 anniversary of the attacks.

The data also suggest that the president extended the binary discourse by giving a sustained presence to each side of each binary. Address-by-address plotting of the percentage of paragraphs containing “good” and the percentage of paragraphs containing “evil” language revealed that both concepts had a consistent presence and appeared to have been emphasized together in a strategic manner. Parallel plotting of “security” and “peril” indicated the same patterns. These data are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

The figures reveal two findings. First, prior to September 11, the themes of evil, security, and peril never exceeded 10% of the president’s paragraphs, whereas during the “extension phase” of this discourse, which began with the October 7, 2001, announcement of military action in Afghanistan, each theme was almost always present in more than 10% of the president’s paragraphs. Specifically, these themes were in at least 1 of every 10 presidential paragraphs—and often much more—in 33 of 36 possible instances during these addresses. Second, the figures show that the two sides of each binary moved with a remarkable synchronicity across the addresses, which strongly suggests these ideas were being employed in

a concerted manner. These figures, then, suggest that following establishment of the binaries the president attempted to sustain these over time by utilizing both occasional repetition of the original binaries and more subtle emphasis on each of the opposing sides.

In addition, we examined the relationship between the president's use of these themes in addresses and the presence of these themes in the respective editorials following addresses. This analysis revealed a strong correspondence between the percentage of presidential paragraphs and the percentage of editorials containing the themes of evil ( $r = .71, n = 15, p < .05$ ), security ( $r = .67, n = 15, p < .05$ ), and peril ( $r = .67, n = 15, p < .05$ ), but not good ( $r = .17, n = 15, n.s.$ ). These correlational data indicate that the president's relative emphases on the first three of these themes were closely paralleled by editorial discourse on an address-by-address basis. In addition, only two editorials offered criticisms of the president's usage of the binary themes, with both narrowly focused on the president's "axis of evil" reference in the 2002 State of the Union. These results, then, indicate that editorials often circulated the president's discourse and, in so doing, helped to engender a communication climate that he desired.

#### *Additional Analysis*

Close examination of the over-time relationship of the themes of security and peril during the extension phase of the president's discourse in Figure 2 is suggestive of two distinct periods of emphasis beginning with Bush's 2002 State of the Union address. The first three addresses of 2002 might be viewed as the administration's "homeland security" policy campaign, beginning with the president's claim in the State of the Union that "our first priority must always be the security of our nation" (Bush, 2002a). The next national presidential address came in June, when he announced a reformulated version of the Department of Homeland Security in a speech, as might be expected, replete with security language. On the 1-year anniversary of September 11, Bush again emphasized security more than peril. The four presidential addresses that followed, in contrast, might be viewed as the "Iraq War" policy campaign. The first of the four was the president's address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 12, which voiced the administration's desire to disarm Iraq—by force if necessary. The three subsequent addresses all focused largely on the "Iraq threat," culminating with Bush's March 17, 2003, ultimatum to Saddam Hussein.

With these policy emphases seemingly tied to strategic usage by the president of specific sides of the security/peril binary, we created subsets within the postattack presidential addresses and newspaper editorials—a homeland security campaign period (first three addresses of 2002) and an Iraq War campaign period (last two addresses of 2002 and first two of 2003). We then ran crosstabs for each of these subperiods that examined whether the emphasized side of the binary was present in significantly greater degree in both presidential addresses and editorials than in the other respective post-September 11 texts.

The results strongly suggest that the president strategically emphasized a particular side of the security/peril binary to fit a specific administration policy goal, while, again, newspaper editorials closely aligned with the president's discourse.

Security language was far more present—in both presidential addresses and newspaper editorials—during the homeland security campaign. Specifically, Bush's use of security terminology during these addresses was double (in 31% vs. 15% of paragraphs) that of his other postattack addresses ( $X^2 = 12.6$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the presence of this language in editorials increased from 47% to 70% of texts during this period ( $X^2 = 7.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In remarkably similar data, peril language was significantly more present—in both presidential addresses and newspaper editorials—during the Iraq war campaign. Specifically, Bush's use of peril terminology during these addresses was double (in 30% vs. 15% of paragraphs) that of the other postattack addresses ( $X^2 = 15.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the presence of peril discourse in editorials rose from 57% to 74% of texts during this period ( $X^2 = 7.4$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### **Discussion**

These results provide significant insight into President Bush's usage of binary constructions and the adoption in newspaper editorials of this language in the months between the September 11 attacks and the Iraq War in spring 2003. Several points merit discussion.

Our evidence strongly suggests that the president employed a strategic binary discourse with three key attributes. First, Bush's consistent references to the September 11 attacks indicate that he used these events as a central organizing object in his national addresses. As a political strategy, frequent references to September 11 undoubtedly resonated with a U.S. public that widely perceived American values as attacked that day. Further, emphasis on the terrorist attacks also likely brought to mind the trauma experienced by many Americans (see Schuster et al., 2001) and the president's effective rhetorical responses in the days and weeks afterward. As a result, September 11 served as a discursive foundation upon which a number of policy goals were justified—including the U.S.A. Patriot Act, establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, and two military campaigns. It also seems meaningful that the only address in which Bush did not refer to September 11 was his ultimatum to Saddam just prior to the commencement of war in Iraq. In this instance, the president may have purposely avoided making one last attempt to connect Saddam to the September 11 attacks—a connection that the administration had tried unsuccessfully to make in the buildup to the war. This, of course, was a strategic concern that suggests an intentionally constructed discourse. Notably, had the central organizing object been something else—such as education or tax cuts, two other administration policy concerns—the president's ability to speak in binary terms with credibility well may have been more difficult because these topics are not as clearly viewed in moral terms. In short, the central organizing object is crucial for a binary discourse.

Second, the results suggest that the president ordered his binary communications in a strategic manner. In the crucial period immediately following the attacks, Bush significantly increased his usage of both binaries and did so in a rhetorically notable manner, particularly for good/evil. The president's phrasing of

security/peril as comparatively less memorable may be explained by three factors: (a) Good/evil language lends itself to more culturally powerful phrasing than security/peril because of its religious groundings; (b) the administration intended for security/peril to be relatively less emphasized because overdramatization of this binary by the president could have had significant negative consequences in the immediate aftermath of the attacks; and (c) security/peril, because it had been almost nonexistent in the president's discourse prior to September 11, did not need to be as rhetorically notable in order to be apparent. Following the president's establishment of these binaries, he extended them over time by periodically employing the binaries in his addresses and by consistently emphasizing the respective sides. Not surprisingly, restatement of the binaries was far from ubiquitous, because overuse would have diminished their rhetorical value; nonetheless, they were present in nearly all addresses. At the same time, these binaries were subsumed within a sustained emphasis upon either side of each binary. These two strategies operated interdependently: The president's emphasis on the concepts of good and evil (and, similarly, security and peril) across communications subtly evoked the full binary and reinforced a conception of these ideas as oppositional—a perspective that was anchored by the president's occasional direct juxtapositions. Once the binaries were firmly established, the use of these tactics together was almost certainly more than sufficient to sustain the discourse.

Third, the results indicate that President Bush consistently employed multiple binaries in his communications. Specifically, the president strategically employed two familiar Cold War binaries that, as in the past when used to justify war and assuage wartime guilt (Ivie, 1980, 1990), functioned together particularly well. For example, the good/evil binary offered to the American public a sense of certainty in anxious times while lending credibility to security/peril by suggesting that there are people “evil enough” to carry out actions that threaten U.S. lives. At the same time, the security/peril binary avoided the religious trappings of good/evil while offering specific policy applications. Indeed, our results indicate that Bush emphasized the security side of the binary when the administration's major policy objective was to establish the Department of Homeland Security, and the peril side when the administration pushed for a war to remove the Iraq threat. In combination, these binaries reflected and contributed to a sense of moral certitude among the Bush administration that was used to justify limits on civil liberties, a dismissal of United Nations conventions, and major preemptive military action while also engendering consistent public support for the president and the administration's “war on terrorism” (Pew, 2003).

The post-September 11 binary discourse of the president, therefore, seems to be a clear example of what Manheim (1991, 1994) has termed “strategic political communication,” in which leaders craft their public language with the goal of creating, controlling, distributing, and using mediated messages as a political resource (see also Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Zaller, 1994b). A binary discourse seems ideally suited for a political culture dominated by mass media for several reasons. For one, central organizing objects provide the media with a coherent frame within which their coverage can have a

greater resonance with the public. Further, these objects frequently comprise the “big story” of the time, something that appeals to media outlets because of the increased public interest—and economic rewards—that accompany these stories. The presence of a particular ordering of discourse also supports this big-story mentality that exists among the media: The establishment phase provides the press with the discursive icons that will shape the story and make it memorable, while the extension phase prolongs the story—and the chance for elevated media profits—until the next compelling narrative arrives. Finally, the presence of multiple binary constructions is particularly attractive to the press because each of them (a) feeds a sense of conflict, which is the heart of most political news coverage; (b) provides rhetorical flourishes that news media outlets desire—and that television news, in particular, requires; and (c) has moral staying power, as suggested by the decades-long, binary-rich Cold War era (see Ivie, 1990; Kuypers, 1997).

As a result, a political leader can have high confidence that the press will echo a binary discourse, as occurred here with President Bush. Indeed, our findings show quite clearly that the press—at least the institutional voices of the press—aligned remarkably with the president’s good/evil and security/peril constructions. Generally, editorials also echoed the president’s emphasis upon each particular side of the binary as he extended them over time. The exception to this trend was good discourse, a theme that editorials are less likely to echo because it is a regular feature of both presidential rhetoric and press coverage. As such, editorials have less reason to rely on the president to trigger its usage. Notably, this tendency of the press to echo the president’s usage of binaries suggests a type of agenda-setting effect. Although most agenda-setting scholarship has focused on the ability of the press to set the public agenda, some scholarship has also considered the factors that set the media agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). Our findings suggest that presidential discourse—at least during periods of high crisis—can play an important role in shaping editorial commentary and therefore adds to the body of scholarship that has noted the importance of political messages in setting the media agenda (e.g., Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Wanta, 1992; Weaver & Nimley Elliot, 1985).

That editorials consistently took cues from the president is no small matter given the important role of news media in shaping the public’s collective memory (Edy, 1999; Peri, 1999), particularly through the editorial mechanisms of interpretation and education (Huckin, 2002; Vermeer, 2002). When the language of the press so closely follows the discourse of the president, citizens and other political leaders who monitor the perspectives in these leading news media (see Powlick, 1995) could not help but interpret these editorials as a message of support for the president and his (and his party’s) agenda. Such cues in editorials, research by Dalton et al. (1998) has suggested, may be particularly influential upon public opinion in elections. Therefore, regardless of journalists’ intent, an echoing press is, functionally, far from a neutral press. Indeed, it seems highly likely that the press, through consistent amplification of the president’s communications, contributed to the president’s remarkable successes with Congress between Septem-

ber 11 and the Iraq War and to the Republican Party's 2002 election triumph, when the party gained seats in both houses of Congress—the first time this had happened for a president in mid-term elections since 1934.

Further, that Bush employed a binary discourse and the press so closely echoed this discourse had implications that extended beyond electoral outcomes. In a context of a binary discourse that featured good/evil and security/peril, we suggest that it became more acceptable to stifle actions or words thought to potentially aid evil or induce peril. Examples abound between autumn 2001 and spring 2003. In the months immediately after the terrorist attacks, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, in response to comments critical of the United States made by television talk-show host Bill Maher, warned that “people have to watch what they say and watch what they do,” and Attorney General John Ashcroft said that critics of the Bush administration “only aid terrorists” because such commentary “gives ammunition to America’s enemies, and pause to America’s friends” (Carter & Barringer, 2001; Lewis, 2001). Outside the government, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued a report identifying U.S. university faculty and public officials who, they claimed, were “blaming America first” and “giving comfort to America’s enemies” (ACTA, 2001). Well more than a year later, in the context of the Iraq conflict, *CBS News* anchor Dan Rather was strongly criticized for granting an interview, and thus an audience, to Saddam Hussein (see Rich, 2003), and NBC fired news correspondent Peter Arnett after he criticized the U.S. war effort in an interview with Iraq’s state-run television network (see Jensen, 2003). At a minimum, the binary discourse of the president, widely disseminated by an echoing press, did little to discourage such actions.

Finally, future research might attempt to determine if and how binary discourses have been implemented by past presidents or other important political actors. For example, former President Ronald Reagan famously employed the good/evil binary to characterize the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” but it remains to be seen if he effectively employed a broader binary discourse that was actively echoed by the press. This research suggests that such strategic discourses are likely to be echoed in the press, although particular themes may be more likely to be echoed than others. Closer consideration of this relationship would provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which political elites make their discourse media-friendly and would add to a growing body of research examining the ways in which such political actors communicate strategically in mass media environments. Further, examining binary discourse across presidents in different time periods and media climates might also shed light on the types of contexts in which binaries are most commonly used. Although the binaries we examined are particularly well suited for a wartime environment, other contexts may encourage the use of different binaries that have distinct implications. Studies that illuminate the ways in which binary discourses operate in social movements, political campaigns, or legal proceedings, for example, would expand understanding of the potential of these constructions both to create and limit communicative possibilities across different settings and further highlight their ability to function as a powerful discursive strategy in U.S. politics.

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