

“A Discovered Dissembler Can Achieve Nothing Great”; Or, Four Theses on the Death of Presidential Rhetoric in an Age of Empire

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Because of the explosion of mass media, we have entered a new age of white noise; because of the disastrous extension of U.S. imperial ambitions, we have entered a new age of political deception; when these two historical factors are combined with the peculiar communicative habits of President George W. Bush, Americans are left with what we call a post-rhetorical presidency. This is an anti-democratic condition wherein presidential discourse is not meant to mobilize, educate, and uplift the masses; rather, by marshaling ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection, post-rhetorical presidential discourse attempts to confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation. Under these new conditions, the president defines fantasy, not reality; he numbs citizens rather than energizing them; instead of informing and teaching, he chooses to dumb down and stupefy. We pursue this thesis by offering four philosophical theses and three rhetorical case studies of the president's public speaking, thus combining critical theory and rhetorical criticism to help map what may represent the death of democracy.

Writing in 1757 as the advice-spewing, joke-flinging, humble yet wise Poor Richard, Benjamin Franklin warned his readers that lying was an efficient route to ruining one's career. "Since no man can engage the active Assistance of others without first engaging their Trust;

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and Moreover, since Men will trust no further than they judge one for his Sincerity," Franklin mused, then "it follows that a discovered Dissembler can achieve nothing great or considerable" (1987, 1290). A child of colonialism, a keen observer of imperial politicking, and a brilliant student of persuasion, Franklin understood that dissembling public figures not only ruined their own reputations but polluted the waters of public discourse. Two hundred fourteen years later, when the Pentagon Papers were published by the *New York Times* in 1971, Americans were stunned to learn that dissembling had become an across-the-board government policy. Many Washington elites had not only lied to the public and ignored cautionary intelligence reports provided by the CIA and Pentagon but had lied so repeatedly that they had forgotten that they were lying—enough dissemblers began to believe their own lies regarding Vietnam that U.S. foreign policy was turned into a deadly chase for outcomes that were never possible. As Hannah Arendt lamented in 1972, "There always comes the point beyond which lying becomes counterproductive" (7). Franklin and Arendt would be disappointed, then, to learn that we have entered a new phase in American political life, one where lying is less a strategy employed in particular situations to achieve particular aims and more of a cultural constant necessitated by the strains empire puts on democracy—that is, ours is an age of imperial deception, cheerful dissimulation, and deadly distraction. Because of these factors, we argue that presidential rhetoric is dead and that the health of the republic is threatened.

George C. Edwards III (1996) has argued that presidential rhetoric, "even in the hands of the most skilled rhetorician," does not "directly influence public opinion" (214; see Edwards 2003). Although presidents have always strived to influence public opinion, to mobilize citizens to act, and to place new issues on the public's agenda, their rhetorical power, according to Edwards, has always been heavily constrained—presidential rhetoric does not function as a "hypodermic needle," a term scholars once used to describe the effects of media on audiences. In contrast to Edwards' arguments, David Zarefsky (2004) believes that presidential rhetoric "defines political reality" (611). That is, the presidency is as much about shaping rhetorical possibilities—what is sayable? what are the contours of debate? what options are considered?—as it is about producing measurable effects. Building upon but also moving beyond Edwards, Zarefsky, and a host of other presidential, rhetorical, and cultural studies scholars, we argue that George W. Bush's presidential rhetoric marks a fundamental shift in U.S. political discourse. Indeed, we believe that we have entered an age of a *post-rhetorical presidency* (see Crockett 2003) marked by a president who, like all presidents before him, seeks to define the bounds of political discourse, but who does not do so through the traditional means of eloquence, logic, pathos, or narrative storytelling, but by marshaling ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection. Post-rhetorical presidential discourse attempts to confuse public opinion, prevent citizen action, and frustrate citizen deliberation. Under these new conditions, the occupant of the White House does not define reality but fantasy; he or she does not energize citizens but numbs them; he or she does not attempt to inform and teach but instead to dumb down and stupefy. In short, *presidential rhetoric is dead*.

The death of presidential rhetoric is linked to two historical factors. First, the explosion of mass media has left the nation awash in white noise, literally drowning in

communicative trash, and hence we are increasingly incapable of concentrating on or making sense of, let alone responding to, presidential discourse. Second, as the United States has embarked upon a catastrophic escalation of imperial ambition, so the White House has chosen not to explain its policies to citizens but to distract them so that an imperial president can act as “the decider”¹ without having to account for his actions to Congress, the Supreme Court, or the people (see Hartnett and Stengrim 2006; Rudalvige 2005; Schlesinger 2004). This combination of infinite white noise and enhanced executive power has shattered our traditional norms of political discourse, leaving citizens as little more than passive recipients of increasingly extravagant spectacles—“shock and awe” was a failed military plan, but it accurately describes the White House’s post-rhetorical strategy of inundating the public with imperial babble. As a chorus of scholars have argued (see Ivie 2007; Kellner 2003; Kull 2003; Lapham 2002; Rampton and Stauber 2003; Weinberger 2001), democracy cannot long survive this situation. A healthy republic requires political discourse that enables citizens to critique their government, public debate that is transparent and open to competing opinions, and decision-making processes based on balancing contrasting perspectives, thus creating a situation in which decisions are made for the common good, not just for the benefit of the few (see Barber 2007; Mercieca and Aune 2005). To put this argument in its most dramatic form: as presidential rhetoric dies, so die the democratic practices of the republic.

To pursue this alarming thesis, this essay unfolds on two parallel tracks representing different critical methodologies. Track one, honoring the philosophical style of Franklin and Arendt, consists of four interlocking theses that invite readers to think historically about the conditions of presidential discourse, to consider the relationships between imperial foreign policies and the quality of domestic political argumentation, to address the links between presidential dissimulation and imperial violence, and to ponder the fate of the republic in this age of post-rhetorical presidential discourse. Track two, working in the tradition of Edwards and Zarefsky, consists of three rhetorical interludes offering brief readings of President Bush’s April 2003 Dearborn speech, his January 2005 second inaugural address, and his April 2005 Fort Hood speech. Our analyses of these three speeches employ traditional means of rhetorical criticism to support the more sweeping theoretical claims forwarded in our four theses. Taken as a whole, our four theses and our three rhetorical interludes demonstrate that presidential rhetoric is dead and that imperial hubris is ruining the republic. These claims are diagnostic, however, and not prophetic, meaning the essay is infused with a deep desire to reverse the trends addressed here and hence to salvage a sense of healthy democratic deliberation from this age of imperial and post-rhetorical presidential discourse.

Thesis One: Presidential Discourse is Dead

Most of the materials gathered in the papers of Thomas Jefferson, now totaling thirty-three volumes, have been collected and published posthumously: the vast majority

1. President Bush’s “I’m the decider” comment is available from <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/04/18/rumsfeld/>.

of these texts consists of private letters, personal drafts, and internal governing documents, not public speeches. Jefferson understood that part of the aura of the president depended on not appearing too common—we were a new republic with egalitarian aspirations, a nation wherein Walt Whitman (1855) would later celebrate the fact that no man was required to bow before another, where “all doctrines, all politics and civilization exurge from you,” the teeming masses (1966, 60), but Jefferson understood that we should also be a republic led by a president with a sense of grandeur and elegance. Words would be chosen carefully and used sparingly. Thus, when Jefferson gave a speech, people listened, people argued about it—it was a special occasion. In fact, as a means of reinforcing the dignity of the words of the president, it was understood into the late-antebellum period that presidential speeches would be delivered to Congress by one of the president’s agents. For example, when President Franklin Pierce delivered his first annual message (what we now call the State of the Union address) to Congress on December 5, 1853, the text was recited in the Senate by his secretary, Sidney Webster (see Hartnett, forthcoming; Pierce 1909). From one perspective, we can imagine presidents who were poor public speakers (such as Jefferson) feeling grateful for this respite from the difficult task of addressing potentially hostile legislators. From another perspective, the distance between absent author and gathered audience may have reinforced a sense of regality, of an authority so great that it need not be present to command attention. From a different perspective, Jefferson hoped this practice would enable his words to be heard as simple republican offerings freed from the trappings of official power. From yet another perspective, we can imagine presidents who were good public speakers (such as Pierce) lamenting the inability to spin an address via the subtle nonverbal, interpersonal, and aural charms possessed by those blessed with the gift of performance. The custom of receiving presidential discourse from afar was therefore a personal relief to some presidents and a lost political opportunity for others, a possible reinforcement of presidential authority in some circumstances but also an attempt to render presidential rhetoric in a humble mode in other cases. The point is that, up until roughly President Woodrow Wilson, custom dictated that presidents speak sparingly, that they speak eloquently, that they speak from a sense of distance and privilege, and that they speak only about subjects of the most pressing national urgency. Being the president of the world’s first modern democracy did not mean that your speaking habits should be pedestrian.

We have come a long way since Franklin Pierce sent his secretary onto the floor of Congress to deliver his speeches. For example, the White House Web page (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>) records President George W. Bush giving a speech, sometimes many speeches, on almost every day that he has been in office. For example, in January 2005, in the three weeks prior to delivering his second inaugural address on the 20th, the president delivered speeches about tsunami relief on the 1st, 3d, 8th, 10th, 13th, and 15th; he spoke about medical liability reform on the 5th, class-action reform on the 6th, asbestos litigation on the 7th, Palestinian elections on the 9th, homeland security on the 11th, and education on the 12th and 14th; and he spoke about the heroism of U.S. soldiers on the 17th, 18th, and 19th. Considering that he talked to the public in a formal manner almost every day in the first three weeks of January—and there were more informal occasions than the sixteen formal ones noted here—what special significance

should any of us attach to the second inaugural address? Indeed, by the afternoon of the 20th, the president was involved in his seventeenth speech in just the first three weeks of January. Delivering this glut of speeches renders the second inaugural address as just another speech, as merely one of seventeen in a twenty-day stretch, as but one more opportunity for an embattled White House to try to control the spin cycle.

Jeffrey Tulis (1987) and other scholars have examined the rise and effects of the “rhetorical presidency,” or the proclivity of the president to speak directly to the people in the hopes of affecting opinions, setting agendas, and influencing decision makers. Tulis argues that “since the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson . . . presidents regularly ‘go over the heads’ of Congress to the people at large in support of legislation and other initiatives” (4). Tulis believes that direct appeals to the people have become such “an unquestioned premise of our political culture” that they carry the aura of naturalness and tradition (4). Other scholars have wondered when this shift occurred and have questioned the degree of effectiveness that any president actually has in using the rhetorical presidency to shape national debate, but there is general agreement that twentieth-century presidents talked to the people more directly and more often than their predecessors (see Cook 2002; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Ellis 1998; Klinghard 2005; Ragsdale and Theis 1997; Teton 2003; Zarefsky 2000). The concern is that, when presidents try to persuade the people to apply pressure to their representatives, it may disturb the balance of power between the three branches. The rhetorical presidency, so the argument goes, enables the president’s agenda to triumph while congressional deliberation, meant to be the defining characteristic of the republic, is marginalized. If we could count on the president to be omniscient and benevolent, and if there were not unintended consequences of political action—if “angels were to govern men” as James Madison (1787) mused in *Federalist* no. 51 (1999, 290)—then there would be no danger in giving a president *carte blanche* powers over the nation. However, we know that angels do not govern men, which is why the Founders built a system of checks and balances. Thus, the danger of the rhetorical presidency is that it skews the equilibrium between the branches of government, possibly elevating the executive to a perilously powerful position.

Although scholars have been alarmed at the proclivity of twentieth-century presidents to appeal directly to the people, we believe that this practice—fueled by the twin forces of media proliferation and the needs of imperial politics—has recently gotten much more perverse. We fear that we have entered a post-democratic age marked by what Jean Baudrillard (1988) calls “the ecstasy of communication”: this is a world in which “all events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information” (24). The post-rhetorical presidency does not seek to appeal to the people so that they will influence their congressional representatives or engage in community action, but rather uses continuous public chatter, outright lies, cover-ups when necessary, barrages of war imagery, and patriotic appeals to blind loyalty to produce such an ecstatic array of (dis)information that citizens become overwhelmed bystanders to the president’s agenda. Indeed, the numbing ubiquity of presidential discourse has become a subject of ridicule. Consider Don DeLillo’s (2003) *Cosmopolis*, where President Midwood, a zombie with characteristics strikingly similar to George Bush, spends his days riding around in a

limousine, his every twitch and scratch beamed to millions of screens via a “live video-stream, accessible worldwide” (76). President Midwood is therefore “omnipresent,” an eternally accessible televisual companion, yet because of his videostreamed condition he appears to the novel’s protagonist as “the undead. He lived in a state of occult repose” (77). No more nor less than an infinitely looped soap commercial or an ever-running ticker of sports scores, the president has become just another televisual banality, another mediated ghost floating among the living dead of our mass-produced hallucinations. President Bush may not have reached the depths of his novelistic counterpart, yet his speaking schedule for the month of January 2005 (and for every month since then) demonstrates how his presidential discourse has become little more than another distraction in a world awash in white noise.

Rhetorical Interlude One: The Dearborn Speech²

On April 28, 2003, President Bush delivered a speech in Dearborn, Michigan. A suburb of Detroit, Dearborn is situated in a part of southeast Michigan that includes the nation’s largest Arab-American community, totaling on some estimates as many as 300,000 people. As Gary Younge (2004) writes, Dearborn is “the hub of Arab America” (15); according to Steven Gold (2001), the “first Islamic mosque in America” was built in the region in 1919, meaning that Dearborn’s Arab-American community is both numerically large and historically rich. Most important for our purposes, Dearborn was also the site of an impromptu celebration on April 10, 2003, when footage of the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad first streamed across U.S. television sets. It would be a few days before reporters proved that the event in Baghdad was staged—it was not an outpouring of anti-Saddam and pro-U.S. Iraqis doing the toppling but Ahmad Chalabi’s hired thugs and U.S. troops in street clothes, all working within an area cordoned off by U.S. tanks. Dearborn’s Arab Americans did not know this on April 10, however, and so they took to the streets to celebrate the symbolic fall of Hussein’s rotten regime, hence turning the faked spectacle in Baghdad into a show of joy in Michigan. Like the events in Baghdad, the rally in Dearborn had an ominous undertone, as three reporters for the Al-Jazeera network found themselves surrounded by marchers shouting slogans against Al-Jazeera. It took seven Dearborn police officers to protect the reporters from the fury of the crowd (see CNN 2003).

Within eighteen days the president was in town, clearly hoping to use the eruption of anti-Saddam, anti-Al-Jazeera, and pro-U.S. energy as the backdrop for a major address. Delivered before what was expected to be (and was; see Goldstein 2003; Stevenson 2003) a rabidly pro-war crowd assembled in the final days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the president approached the lectern with the confidence and bounce of a man who thought he had just won a war, hence proving his critics wrong and etching his place amid the nation’s celebrated war heroes. (In fact, the president’s “Top Gun” speech, the occasion for

2. This section of the essay includes modified versions of text that previously appeared in Hartnett and Stengrim (2006, 255-59).

the controversial “Mission Accomplished” banner, was only three days away.) The combination of timing and location meant that the president spoke in Dearborn to an audience thrilled by his policies, even giddy with a sense of possibility.

The president delivered his speech in front of a projection screen, with “Renewal in Iraq” written in both English and Arabic over an otherwise blank outline of the shape of Iraq. With no cities, rivers, roads, or surrounding nations in the image, it portrayed Iraq as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* waiting for the president to fill in the pristine, empty space. This image alone tells us much about the Bush administration’s perception of Iraq, where the weight of history, cultural conflicts, or regional and ethnic tensions is insignificant; indeed, for the Bush administration and its corporate supporters, Iraq is a vacant space waiting for new content. The image suggests that a benevolent U.S. empire will fill in the empty gaps, bringing meaning to the meaningless, purpose to those who are lost, salvation to the damned. Nonetheless, the president (Bush 2003) cautioned his audience that “America has no intention of imposing our form of government or our culture” on Iraq. But Americans have become so accustomed to hearing the president conflating politics, morals, and economics, with each wrapped tightly in the comforting grandeur of renewed nationalism, that two sentences later an audience member erupted in a chant of “USA! USA! USA!” This was the second time that chant had interrupted the speech, hence making explicit what everyone in the room understood: that the reconstruction of Iraq is an exercise in heroic U.S. empire building. Thus, as it did the first time the USA! call arose, the giddy audience again applauded the chant of USA! USA! USA! So even while the president ostensibly promised that the reconstruction of Iraq would be more than just another example of colonial conquest, his audience reveled in the nationalist thrill of the moment, hearing the speech less as a statement about the future success of Iraq than about the gigantic power and prowess of the United States. To skeptical viewers or readers, to anyone around the world who doubted the president’s claims for waging war on Iraq, or who knew that the Dearborn rally was triggered by a fraud, such a moment could not help but seem like a case study in wartime triumphalism and hypocrisy.

Two more passages from this speech merit closer attention. The first concerns the president’s portrayal of the role of oil in the reconstruction of Iraq. Speaking of efforts to rebuild Iraq’s power grid, the president said that “oil—Iraqi oil, owned by the Iraqi people—is flowing again to fuel Iraq’s power plants” (Bush 2003). The problem with this claim, however, is that the oil in Iraq is owned not by the Iraqi people but by the international consortium of creditors behind the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI). Managed by the U.S.-based banking giant JP Morgan Chase, which heads a group of thirteen banks, the TBI issues, according to Mitch Jeserich (2004) of CorpWatch, “export guarantees for trade between Iraq and foreign companies and governments.” By 2004 the TBI had amassed \$2.4 billion to back such guarantees, against which it had already written “\$300 million worth of letters of credit” (Jeserich 2004). Put simply, no one will do business in Iraq without some certainty that they will be paid for their services, so the TBI (working in conjunction with the U.S. Export-Import Bank) functions as a guarantor of payment, an institutional safety net for capitalists doing business in Iraq (also see Baron, Gordon, and Peterson 2003; Chatterjee 2004).

The rebuilding of Iraq cannot move forward without such an institution because Iraq's banking system is shattered, its economy is devastated, and there is little indigenous money to pay for postwar services (see Alnasrawi 2004). But of course there is oil, or at least the promise of oil once the fields are returned to working capacity, meaning Iraq's reconstruction at the hands of U.S. corporations is based not only on gigantic outlays of U.S. tax dollars but also on the TBI's credit, which is based on the collateral of Iraqi oil. In short, the TBI can only issue credits today on the basis of assumed oil revenues tomorrow. As Jeserich (2004) puts it, the U.S.-managed TBI is "mortgaging the national oil revenues." This is a dangerous ploy, however, for the still-unstable Iraqi oil fields are a swirl of uncertainty, meaning the TBI's guarantees to investors and contractors are based on assumed future profits, not confirmed present capacities. Indeed, in November 2004, the *New York Times* described "the oil industry in the north" as "crippled" by insurgents (Wong 2004a; also see Wong 2004b). By the summer of 2007, oil production had begun to rise, yet it was reported that between 100,000 and 300,000 barrels a day were being stolen by "smugglers, insurgents, and corrupt officials," thus siphoning between \$5 and \$15 million a day away from sanctioned economic purposes and into the hands of those parties interested in destabilizing Iraq (Glanz 2007, A1). If and when TBI's credits are called in, and if there is not enough capital to cover the loans—as seems highly likely—then Iraq will dive into both depression and dispossession, for corporations will sue the TBI for possession of their promised collateral: Iraq's oil. Moreover, the UN-created Compensation Fund will siphon 5 percent of Iraq's future oil sales to pay war reparations for the First Gulf War, while the Development Fund for Iraq (DFI)—created by the Coalition Provisional Authority—will administer other oil monies at the discretion of U.S. managers (see Alnasrawi 2004). The network of banking and business regulations at play here is intricate, too labyrinthine to discuss in full detail, but our point is clear: the Iraqi oil does not belong to the Iraqi people, as the president happily claimed; rather, it belongs to local thieves and to JP Morgan Chase and the international consortium of bankers behind the TBI, those parties benefiting from the Compensation Fund, and the international oil industry elites running the DFI. President Bush's rendering of postwar economic conditions in Iraq therefore amounts to little more than a fairy tale—he is not so much describing reality as painting a fantastical world of make-believe.

The second moment in the president's Dearborn speech calling for closer attention deals with the looting of Iraq. The president says:

We're working with the Iraqis to recover artifacts, to find the hoodlums who ravished the National Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad [applause]. Like many of you here, we deplore the actions of the citizens who ravished the museum. And we will work with the Iraqi citizens to find out who they were and bring them to justice [applause]. (Bush 2003)

Given the president's prior comments regarding the use of American-style "justice" to deal with Al Qaeda, in many instances using justice as a euphemism for killing terrorists, and factoring in President Bush's notorious use of the death penalty while governor of Texas, we suspect many of the members of the audience heard this claim as a restatement, even a celebration, of the president's record as a "get tough on crime" leader. The problem

with this bravura claim, however, is that U.S. troops were ordered to stand idly by while most of the “ravishing” took place, instead protecting only the headquarters of the Oil Ministry. The president may well have ordered U.S. troops to try to “recover artifacts,” and he would no doubt not hesitate to hammer the perpetrators of such crimes with the most violent versions of U.S. “justice,” but there is little doubt that U.S. troops were complicit with such acts of cultural theft and destruction in the first place (on the looting, see Fisk 2003; Lawler 2003; Matthew 2004; Riding 2003; Vuillamy 2003). Thus, the president’s claims and the facts do not align. Benjamin Franklin once quipped that in such situations “Saying and Doing have quarrel’d and parted,” yet this parting holds dire consequences for Iraqis, U.S. troops, and the health of democracy (1987, 1288).

Indeed, whereas the complicated banking arguments offered above may understandably be news to most readers, the looting that took place in Iraq was the subject of nightly news reports. This means that, for the president’s claims to ring true, he must count on his audience simply not knowing the facts. Both moments, then, the oil and antiquities claims, appear to rely not only on the president twisting the facts but on his knowing he can do so, on his assuming that his audience will respond not with informed questions but with nationalist chants of USA! USA! USA! Jonathan Schell (2004) has described this rhetorical strategy as part of “an active insurgency against facts,” as “a pre-emptive strike against reality itself” (10). While some Americans may find such fact-starved, reality-bending spectacles endearing, we suspect that many viewers worldwide, like us, find the moment chilling, for it demonstrates state propaganda as cheerful spectacle. The president’s Dearborn speech therefore indicates how the reconstruction of Iraq will be discussed by the Bush administration and its supporters not so much as an opportunity to think critically about how to rebuild a devastated nation while respecting its local norms and customs, but as an occasion for asserting grandiose claims of benevolent nationalism—USA! USA! USA!

Thesis Two: Rendering Presidential Discourse Trivial Fits the Needs of Imperial Deception

In *Desert Screen*, his disturbing collection of essays about the First Gulf War, Paul Virilio (1991) argues that government control has progressed historically through a cycle, moving from “insufficient information, or limited censorship,” to “the total absence of information” as seen in the USSR at the height of its madness, to a new stage of “disinformation by excess information” (2002, 67). Virilio links this latest stage to a larger phenomenon, what he calls the “abolition of the appearance of facts” (124). President Bush is a stunning exemplar of this claim, for he has lied so often, so crassly, so baldly, with such flare and impunity, that even the best critics stand flabbergasted at the mountain of evidence that grows larger each day with each new moment of presidential dissimulation. Monday’s lie about weapons of mass destruction is replaced by Tuesday’s dissembling pseudo-retraction, which is forgotten in the face of Wednesday’s whopping tale about links between Hussein and Al Qaeda, which is replaced by Thurs-

day's fantasy about the economy, which is buried beneath Friday's cheerful chatter on the White House lawn, and so on and so on in a flood of numbing contradictions.

As demonstrated in our first rhetorical interlude, and as we argue in our following sections of rhetorical criticism, George W. Bush's presidential rhetoric is littered with, even structured around, a series of claims that can only be called fantasies. Spinning fantasies is, of course, what politicians do; creating cultural fictions to guide our nation can even be a noble calling. But the fantasies launched by the Bush White House have been less ennobling than paralyzing. In fact, in a now-infamous interview with Ron Suskind (2004), an anonymous White House advisor chastised Suskind and his kind—for which we assume he meant most of us who read this journal—for being foolish members of “the reality-based community.” Whereas we believe in norms of evidence, fair argument, and the power of informed criticism, the White House advisor said, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. . . . We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to study what we do” (Suskind 2004). Virilio’s concern about the “abolition of the appearance of facts” is confirmed here as what politics in the empire has become: facts are dead, reality is for losers, we are so soaked in “disinformation by excess information,” so enthralled by the “ecstasy of communication,” that we live now in what can only be called an Imperial Age of Make-Believe.

Rhetorical Interlude Two: The Second Inaugural Address

Between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections the nation witnessed dramatic increases in interest rates, home foreclosures, and unemployment; the astronomical growth of the budget (from a surplus to a deficit of \$307 billion by 2004); the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC; the American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq; and the launching of the War on Terrorism—all of which could have placed President Bush's reelection in jeopardy.³ Common electoral wisdom suggests that Americans usually vote to support wartime presidents, but John Kerry had reason to hope that the spectacular downturn in the economy and Americans' frustrations with their president's dubious reasons for waging war in Iraq could be parlayed into an electoral victory. However, as CNN election-night polling suggests (CNN 2004), “moral values” were more important to Americans than “economy/jobs” or “Iraq.” In other words, two groups of voters drove the election of Bush in 2004: the 22 percent of Americans who ranked “moral values” as “the most important issue” (80 percent of whom voted for Bush compared to the 18 percent who voted for Kerry) and the 19 percent of Americans who ranked “terrorism” as “the most important issue” (86 percent of whom voted for Bush compared to the 14 percent who voted for Kerry). Thus, the Americans who voted for Bush (50.7 percent of the popular vote) agreed with his moral values, supported his War on Terrorism, and thought that those were the most important issues

3. Economic and budget information is from the White House Office of Management and Budget. Available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2004/tables.html>.

facing the nation in 2004.⁴ It comes as no surprise, then, to find that moral values and the War on Terrorism would feature prominently in President Bush's second inaugural address. But there are two other aspects of this speech that merit closer attention. First, the repeated use of apocalyptic imagery reinforces the president's status as a quasi-religious "decider" functioning in millennial, not political, time. Second, the invocation of God's will sanctifies and even authorizes an imperial military agenda launched in the name of heaven. By relying upon apocalyptic and otherworldly images, and by speaking as though U.S. foreign policy is an ordained part of God's larger plan, the president constitutes those who agree with him as passive subjects and those who disagree with him as unpatriotic sinners. Thus, even while championing freedom and democracy, President Bush's second inaugural address offers a decidedly non-democratic version of America's domestic practices and foreign obligations.

Karlynn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1990) explain that "the time of epideictic rhetoric, including inaugurals, is the eternal present," which "allows one to experience a universe of eternal relationships" such as those between the presidency writ large and the American citizenry (27). Casting inaugural addresses in the eternal present allows individual citizens and particular presidents, even while partaking in a specific event at a specific point in time, to imagine themselves as part of a larger, eternal whole: the drama of inauguration that has played out repeatedly since the nation's founding. It is noteworthy, therefore, that President Bush does not invoke the "eternal present," but rather casts his second inaugural address in apocalyptic time. For example, the president (Bush 2005a) begins his speech by stating that "our duties are defined not by the words I use, but by the history we have seen together." This invocation of a shared history would appear to place the speech in political time, in the lived space of human choices and democratic decisions, yet the president then argues that 9/11 was a "day of fire" that saddled Americans with predetermined obligations. Indeed, just as a day of fire begins the apocalypse, so the president appears to be implying that 9/11 was an irrevocable break in political time, a sign pointing to the beginning of End-of-Time prophecies. President Bush therefore begins his second inaugural address with a subtle nod to born-again Americans and all those who saw 9/11 not as an event with specific economic, political, historical, and cultural causes but as evidence of the coming apocalypse. In short, we are not in the time of political parties, national jockeying, or citizen action—we are in God's time.⁵

The idea that time has ended and/or started over is common to Christian thinking—the Gregorian calendar divides the centuries between "before Christ" and "in the year of the Lord," for example—but Hannah Arendt (1963) notes that, since the late eighteenth century, political revolutions have also relied upon this view of time-as-

4. Polling data are from the CNN U.S. Presidential Election Poll, available from <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html>. 2004 election results are from the Electoral College, available from http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/2004/popular_vote.html.

5. Note that "Day of Fire" is the name of a popular Christian rock band. On the uses of apocalyptic imagery, see Bormann (1977); Boyer (1992); Brummett (1984); Murphy (1990); O'Leary (1993); "Knowing the Players: A Guide to Terminology in the Study of Millennial Movements," available from <http://www.mille.org/types.htm>; and the Rapture Index, available from <http://www.raptureready.com>.

rupture and omen. Revolutions have been “inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew,” Arendt writes, “that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold” (28). Indeed, like President Bush’s use of the “day of fire” to associate 9/11 with millennial prophecy, so previous revolutionaries used metaphors such as “storm,” “current,” or “stream” to describe their revolutions “as an irresistible process,” as forces of nature beyond the control of human actors (49). Following in this rhetorical tradition, President Bush’s use of the apocalyptic image of the day of fire enabled him to imply that because a revolution had occurred—in this case set in motion by the horrors of 9/11—his actions should not be judged based on pre-revolutionary (i.e., constitutional) standards. Indeed, the president was signaling that apocalyptic time requires bold actions regardless of the consequences or the public’s wishes. “My attitude is,” the president said at a rally in April 2007, “if they’re still writing about (number) one, 43 doesn’t need to worry about it. I’ve been in politics long enough to know that polls just go poof at times” (quoted in Riechmann 2007). Polls just go “poof”; the judgment of public opinion does not matter; political time fades into millennial time; God will do what God does; the course of events is predetermined; and so the president “doesn’t need to worry.” The president apparently believes that he has been placed at the forefront of biblical events—he has been tapped by God to wage a war beyond criticism, to save democracy by governing undemocratically.⁶

The second feature of President Bush’s second inaugural address that requires closer scrutiny is his invocation of God to testify to his military and economic programs. Previous presidents have referenced God in their inaugural addresses, but according to Campbell and Jamieson (1990), presidents typically “place themselves and the nation in God’s hands” or “claim the authority to place the nation ‘under God’ ” (26). For example, Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address (1865) is almost one continuous prayer. Yet Lincoln invoked God as a supplicant, not as a witness to his military strategies for winning the Civil War. “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away,” Lincoln observed, “yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether’ ” (Lincoln 1989). In accepting God’s judgment for the evils of slavery, Lincoln used his second inaugural address to put the nation under God’s care. Lincoln meant that God had punished the entire United States with the Civil War, not that God sided with either the North or the South against their enemies. There are striking differences between Lincoln’s religious rhetoric and Bush’s. Whereas Bush (2005a) quotes Lincoln mentioning God—“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it”—he did so as a warning to “rulers of outlaw regimes” that “America’s influence is considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom’s cause.” Whereas Lincoln prayed in a humble tone, Bush threatened with

6. For cheerleading accounts of the president’s discarding constitutional norms of governing, see John Yoo (2005, 2006).

bluster and swagger, and so God has morphed from a sublime power above taking sides into a blunt instrument of empire.

It gets worse, however, for according to Arnon Regular in Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper, when President Bush met with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas in Aqaba in 2003, he supposedly said "God told me to strike at Al Qaeda and I struck them and then He instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East" (quoted in Solomon 2007). Because God told Bush "to strike," his second inaugural address repeatedly referenced God to endorse his policies. In some instances, this invocation was folded into our first point regarding millennial time, such as when the president (Bush 2005a) claimed that every "man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth," and "advancing these ideals . . . is the calling of our time." God gives freedom, it is America's job to advance freedom, it is the predetermined "calling of our time," and therefore Americans are doing God's work by fighting wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and whomever else the president declares that God wants him "to strike at." Thus, invoking Kenneth Burke's (1969) notion of "eulogistic covering" (99), Reverend Gaddy, an outspoken critic of President Bush, fumed "how dare any politician . . . suggest that God is a kind of mascot for the nation" (Pagels and Gaddy 2003, 2-3). Despite the reverend's complaint, President Bush calls upon God to justify his imperial military agenda and to position himself as the unquestionable decider, the Chosen One, the Charles Heston-like hero to whom God speaks directly. President Bush's reasoning is therefore theologically shallow and devoid of any sense of democracy: Bush says that God gives freedom, not the Constitution; history is predetermined, not the product of collective human agency; political decisions will be made in consultation with God, not Congress; God favors America, not the needy everywhere.

By combining apocalyptic time and God's endorsement to reinforce and perpetuate an imperial agenda, President Bush's second inaugural address strives to portray the United States' prosecution of the War on Terrorism as inevitable and unquestionable. What is perhaps most striking about this rhetorical strategy is that President Bush did not attempt to speak to or for the whole American people in his speech. He did not seek to unite the nation's feuding factions, as Thomas Jefferson attempted to do in his 1801 first inaugural address (see Browne 2003), for unlike Jefferson, Bush would not tolerate those who did not already agree with him—even as "silent monuments"—rather, Bush's audience were those "true believer" Americans who already supported his war plans. "Fundamentalism," as Harold Perkin (2000) has argued, is "the conviction that the adherents have a special knowledge of and relationship to a Deity" (79). Fundamentalist thinking "allows or even enjoins imposing what they take to be God's will upon other people and, if necessary, punishing them for their disbelief. It therefore overrides any appeal to a secular authority, notably to the will of the majority, and thus to democratic sovereignty" (79). As we have shown, because his rhetoric does not seek to change opinions, but functions "to punish outsiders and reward insiders," Bush's address constitutes a form of what Jennifer Rose Mercieca (2007) calls "epideictic violence," a form of speech meant to celebrate certain values while mercilessly silencing opponents and

disabling criticism (71). Rather than enhancing the nation's democratic practices, then, President Bush's second inaugural address demonstrates their immersion in a swamp of apocalyptic imagery, agency-denying fundamentalism, and millennial dissembling.

Thesis Three: Make-Believe Presidential Discourse Will Kill You

The president inhabits a make-believe world when he chants “democracy” or “freedom” again and again—as in the second inaugural address, for example, where he claims that extending the global growth of U.S.-style freedom is both “the policy of the United States” and “the calling of our time” (Bush 2005a). Because the president has answered this calling by forging an amalgamation of evangelical religion, apocalyptic time, neo-liberal economics, and imperial politics, he believes that “tens of millions have achieved their freedom” under his watch (Bush 2005a). *Where, Mr. President, where are these newly liberated tens of millions who enjoy the fruits of their freedom?* To observe the deadly consequences of this fairy tale, let us consider the randomly selected day of September 18, 2006, when Kabul was hit with another suicide bombing that killed eighteen and wounded sixty (see Gall and Wafa 2006), again confirming that Afghanistan is sliding back toward anarchy. As reported by a host of brave journalists (including Constable 2006; Constable and Hamdard 2006; Gall 2006a, 2006b; McVeigh 2006; Parenti 2004b), drug lords rule the hills, the Taliban are creeping back to power, and President Hamid Karzai is so compromised that he dares not venture outside the capital for fear of losing his life at the hands of guerrillas or insurgents or crooks or drug dealers or the humble peasants who recognize his Blackwater Security Guard contingent as evidence of his serving as little more than a lackey for the empire. Indeed, President Karzai's rule is so compromised that Afghans taunt him with the belittling chant of “Behold the mayor of Kabul!”⁷ If this is democracy and freedom in action, then the Afghans are in dire straits.

On that same day, twenty-one innocents were killed and seventeen were wounded in another bombing of an Iraqi marketplace in Tal Afar; in Ramadi, the police station was hit, killing thirteen; and two more U.S. troops were killed (see Oppel and Razzaq as-Saiedi 2006)—and so it was another day of carnage in Iraq as well, where the president's make-believe democracy is in fact a brutal civil war raging between extremists, an ugly death dance unleashed upon the Iraqi people by a U.S. war machine that knows so well how to bomb nations into ruins but not so well how to rebuild them into functioning democracies. The devastation in Iraq is now so complete, so inexpressibly terrible (see Cockburn 2005; Gettleman 2006; Jaber 2006; Semple 2006; Parenti 2004a; Shadid 2005; Wong and Worth 2006), that it boggles the mind how the president can proclaim that “tens of millions have achieved their freedom.” Indeed, President Bush's ability to celebrate freedom in the face of obvious catastrophe is so startling, so jarring,

7. The “mayor” quotation is from a phrase used by Richard Clarke in an interview with Seymour Hersh (2004, 147); the insult has historical traction, for the Taliban used it in the mid-1990s to mock President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who, like Karzai before him, controlled but a sliver of Afghanistan, with this tenuous power underwritten by foreign aid (see Griffin 2001).

that it reminds us of a line from Walter Benjamin's (1940) classic essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Writing as an exiled Jew in Paris in the dreary winter of 1940 (the fascists stormed the city that May), Benjamin wrote from the edge of an abyss: he believed the world as he knew it was passing before his eyes, for each new day brought another round of Nazi atrocities, another insult to his sense of all that was right and good and worth living for (see Broderson 1996). Having witnessed the murder of his friends and colleagues, the sacking of nations, the destruction of great works of art and literature, and the production of propaganda so gross that it makes the Bush White House appear prudent, Benjamin warned that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (1969, 255). Benjamin understood that history's victors have a habit of forgetting the dead, of stepping across their bloodied bodies on the way to champagne brunches celebrating the march of power.

And so while the president has become our chief video-streamed talking head in this age of the abolition of facts, where war is supposedly waged without deaths, where mass murder is hailed as freedom, we should honor Benjamin and all those who have gone before us by at least saying here are some numbers, some indicators of what—despite the forgettings and fantasies of the president—is actually happening (as of May 4, 2007) in Iraq:

U.S. dead: 3,363

Other coalition dead: 272

Total coalition dead: 3,635

U.S. wounded in action: 32,544

Iraqi police/military killed since April 2005: 6,697

Iraqi civilians killed since April 2005: 31,232

Total Iraqis killed since April 2005: 37,929

Total Iraqis killed since U.S. invasion, *conservative estimate*: between 62,805 and 68,832

Total Iraqis killed since U.S. invasion, *more likely estimate*: over 100,000.⁸

Rhetorical Interlude Three: The Fort Hood Speech

Following his second inaugural address, President Bush and his handlers apparently decided that successful Global War on Terrorism (GWT) rhetoric depended not on righteous denunciations of loathsome Others but on celebratory tributes to democracy as the higher cause for waging global wars for peace. Thus, by March 2005, the president (Bush 2005b) was triumphantly proclaiming from the Rose Garden that "Freedom is on the march" (2); by April he was speaking before troops in Texas of "the global democratic revolution" (2005c, 3). In both cases, President Bush tried to situate the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and its prosecution of the GWT more generally, as central components of a universalizing U.S.-led push for freedom. The rhetorical tenor of these speeches suggests, however, that freedom and democracy will be less political goals than

8. Figures were compiled on May 4, 2007 by the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (<http://www.icasualties.org>) and Iraq Body Count Database (<http://www.iraqbodycount.net>); over 100,000 deaths were reported in Roberts et al. (2004), but this was well before the civil war reached its current fevered pitch, meaning their estimate has been far surpassed.

propagandistic tools. This strategy has historical precedents, as Jennifer Rose Mercieca (forthcoming) has shown how, during the Jacksonian period, “America’s democratic style functioned as a powerfully enticing legerdemain—a slight of hand—with which a party could ambiguously promise power to the people to gain political power for themselves and for their preferred constituency.”

For an example of how President Bush practices this tradition of legerdemain, consider the third sentence of his speech at Fort Hood, Texas, where the president (Bush 2005c) greeted the troops with what he called the “proper Army greeting: Hoo-Ah!” Grateful for the president’s praise of their service to the nation and the cause of globalizing freedom, and responding to the president’s invitation to regale him with the Army greeting, the assembled troops proceeded to interrupt the president’s speech with the Hoo-Ah chant sixteen times, hence turning the occasion into a raucous call and response (see Stevenson 2005). Completing this masterpiece of propaganda, the president praised the troops assembled at Fort Hood—the single largest collection of conventional military weaponry in the world, accounting in one estimate for as much as 40 percent of U.S. conventional combat power (Greider 1998, 3)—for “making the world more peaceful” (Bush 2005c). Eschewing clash-of-civilizations rhetoric, keeping religious references to a minimum, and issuing buoyant proclamations to repeated Hoo-Ahs from the troops, the president offered the world a vision of the United States pursuing what Hartnett and Stengrim (2006) have called “globalization-through-benevolent-empire” (84). This is an oxymoronic formula where the United States acts as a globalizing force for imposed freedom, as a military superpower waging wars for peace, as an imperial republic spreading the American way accompanied by roaring rounds of “democracy”-loving and dissent-destroying Hoo-Ahs.

The transformation in rhetorical strategy addressed here carries serious implications for the health of democratic deliberation. For, although the clash-of-civilizations rhetoric issued in the early days following 9/11 brought to mind some of the worst stereotypes of the ugly American—xenophobic, provincial, self-righteous, racist, culturally obtuse—hence igniting a wave of outraged domestic and international repercussions, this turn to the trope of globalization through benevolent empire puts critics in a difficult, almost impossible position.⁹ Like peace activists facing President Ronald Reagan’s visionary (and utterly deluded) Star Wars rhetoric, so critics of President Bush’s handling of U.S. foreign policy have been placed in the difficult situation of having to explain why they oppose ideas as unopposable as freedom and democracy.¹⁰ Along with being factually deceptive, this new rhetorical strategy therefore makes it even more difficult for dissent to sound legitimate, hence curtailing the health of our public deliberation about the nation’s policies. We may be stuck, then, in a situation imagined almost fifty years ago by Aldous

9. President Bush (2001b) initiated this “clash of civilizations” theme when, in answering a reporter’s question, he said that “the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while”; for responses, see Ford (2001); Hartnett and Stengrim (2006, 100-103, 128-36); Mahajan (2002); Waldman (2001); and Williams (2001).

10. President Ronald Reagan tried to co-opt the language of peace activists in his “Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security,” Washington, DC, March 23, 1983. For rhetorical analyses of the speech, see Goodnight (1986) and Rushing (1986).

Huxley, who warned in *Brave New World Revisited*, his prophetic 1958 cry against Cold War-era propaganda, that

[t]he democracies will change their nature; the quaint old forms—elections, parliaments, Supreme Courts and all the rest—will remain. [But] the underlying substance will be a new kind of . . . totalitarianism. All the traditional names, all the hallowed slogans will remain exactly what they were in the good old days: democracy and freedom will be the theme of every broadcast and editorial. . . . Meanwhile the ruling oligarchy and its highly trained elite of soldiers, policemen, thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators will quietly run the show as they see fit. (137)¹¹

Some readers may find Huxley's vision overwrought, but our analysis (and see Dumm 2006) of George W. Bush's post-rhetorical presidential discourse suggests that it is largely accurate. In fact, Robert Ivie (2005) demonstrates in *Democracy and America's War on Terror* that the United States has been committed, since the Cold War if not before, "to rationalize war as the work of peace" (5). The rationalization depends on the claim that "war and domination (represented as national defense and global leadership) are deemed the only realistic options for protecting freedom and preserving civilization against ubiquitous forces of death, destruction, and chaos" (13; see Zakaria 2003). The Fort Hood speech illustrates how post-9/11 U.S. presidential discourse is committed to practicing this long-standing rhetorical construction, wherein war equals peace and imperialism is extended in the name of democracy—Hoo-Ah!

Thesis Four: Presidential Discourse Based on Imperial Hubris Will Ruin the Republic

President Bush's second inaugural address (2005a) opens with a triumphal claim about the collapse of the Soviet Union, what he happily calls "the shipwreck of communism." And although the USSR sank for many reasons, it was the foolish invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979 that served as the final nail in the coffin of that rotten regime. As reformers fought for their political lives in Moscow, troops were getting hammered by Afghan guerrillas, the deaths mounted each week, the humiliations multiplied, and so the hard-liners in Moscow grew less and less patient with talk of opening up the political process; thus, by the time communism finally imploded, the already-broke treasury had sunk close to \$50 billion worth of arms into a losing effort in Afghanistan (Coll 2004, 238) and the Politburo had become too fractured to govern. As Cold Warriors in the CIA and White House had hoped it would, Afghanistan had become the graveyard of communism (see Coll 2004; Griffin 2001).

President George W. Bush would appear to have forgotten this historical warning. More than just an academic quibble, this forgetting of the recent past carries severe

11. On the notion of a new totalitarianism, see Hartnett and Stengrim (2006) and Dumm (2006).

political consequences, as many of us who have studied the War on Terrorism have concluded that the same forces that shipwrecked communism are buffeting our own republic today. In fact, in an Al Qaeda “playbook,” a planning document captured by U.S. forces, a high-ranking Al Qaeda strategist argued that attacking the United States on 9/11 was meant, in the words of the U.S. analysts who studied the playbook, “to provoke a superpower into invading the Middle East directly” (Brachman and McCants 2006, 7). Thus, just as far-thinking Islamic Jihadis knew they could shipwreck the Soviet Union by dragging it into a war it could not win in Afghanistan, so those same forces—better students of history than the millennial fabulists running the White House—believed they could shipwreck the United States by prodding it to do something equally stupid, such as occupying Afghanistan and Iraq at the same time. Indeed, by pursuing this course of action, President Bush has not only forgotten the lesson of how communism was shipwrecked but, even more frightening, has fallen into precisely the trap sprung by Al Qaeda on 9/11.

This strategic error will come to be recognized as one of the worst political blunders in the history of the republic. For as Terry Eagleton (2005) warns in *Holy Terror*, “If you greet the violence of others with red-necked repression, you are likely to have your buildings blown to pieces” (7). And so this is how the republic will die: at the hands of fabulists sheltered in a world of make-believe, ignoring history as they venture forth into the imperial wars that will bankrupt the treasury, ruin our alliances, murder the innocent, squander our power, and leave the name of America smeared for generations (see Danner 2005; Johnson 2004).

Conclusion

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo (1984) burrows into the “narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power” of television (16). Following DeLillo, we have argued that the communicative dilemmas addressed in this essay are largely the result of structural forces that transcend any particular speech act; that is, because our postmodern culture produces such a dizzying abundance of images, amounting to nothing less than a blizzard of diseased brain-sucking white noise, it has become almost impossible for speakers, *even presidents*, to cut through the barrage and make some lasting impression, some profound sense, some eloquent gesture that lasts longer than the time it takes for the next advertisement to begin, or the next shouting provocateur to snarl, or the next “must see” trash to assault our senses. As portrayed by DeLillo, and as Neil Postman (1986) argues, we are “amusing ourselves to death.”¹²

George W. Bush has responded to this communicative dilemma by attempting to elevate his presidential discourse to the level of benediction; that is, he has sought to rise above the culture of white noise by delivering speeches that are not so much deliberative or informative or historical or policy driven as sermonic—he has functioned, as Robert

12. For strategies for countering this situation, see McChesney, Newman, and Scott (2005); for case studies of how activists cut through the white noise, see DeLuca and Peeples (2002) and the essays collected in Frey and Carragee (2007).

Ivie and Oscar Giner (2007) argue in this journal, as a high priest intoning “a mythic ritual of redemptive violence.” By speaking in this sermonic and violence-justifying manner, the president has sought to create “a kind of moral authority” (Ivie and Giner 2007) that transcends the usual banalities of mass-mediated discourse (see Bostdorff 2003; Conley, forthcoming; Murphy 2003). The problem with this rhetorical strategy is that by delivering his presidential discourse in the register of eschatological religious symbolism, by pinning his presidency to the millennial quest to defeat Evil in the name of God and Truth and Justice—recall his claim that “our responsibility to history is clear: . . . *to rid the world of evil*” (Bush 2001a)—President Bush has created expectations that no man can fulfill (see Beatty 2004; Suskind 2004). The unfulfilled promise of deliverance has thus boomeranged back upon the president in the form of disappointed voters, disenchanted allies, and disastrous policies that have destroyed nations.

To take but one final example, in one of his high sermonic moments in the second inaugural address, President Bush (2005a) declared that “by our efforts, we have lit a fire as well—a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power, it burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.” Despite the passage’s Harlequin-level banalities, it is difficult to argue with the assertion that democracy is better than tyranny or that freedom is better than oppression; it is even heartwarming to think that America, like the burning bush, is an incandescent beacon afire with both hope and creative destruction, both God’s favor and his righteous anger. But as every new day of catastrophe in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates, although a fire has been unleashed, it seems more and more likely that it is the United States that stands to get burned by this untamed fire. For as Walter Benjamin (1940) reminds us, those who speak in apocalyptic terms—as he did—and especially those who claim to shape and guide history according to some higher calling—as the president does—should always remember that “the past has a claim” upon the present, and “that claim cannot be settled cheaply” (254). Indeed, Eagleton (2005) warns us that “the more Western society reacts to terrorist assault with illegality, the more it depletes the very spiritual and political resources which it takes itself to be protecting” (50). Claiming that those illegalities have been launched in the name of *democracy* or *freedom* or *infinite justice* or *God* only renders the whole post-9/11 narrative more shameful. We only hope it is not too late to reverse these trends, for, like Benjamin Franklin, we too believe America is capable of achieving successes “great and considerable”—but doing so will require fair debate, eloquent speech, and active citizens, precisely the republican qualities destroyed by the imperial fantasies of our post-rhetorical president.

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