Language, Politics and 9/11

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SANDRA SILBERSTEIN

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London and New York

Acknowledgments

Introduction

This book is about language, about the ways language is deployed in times of national crisis. In the aftermath of the events of September 11, through public rhetoric, an act of terror became a war; the Bush presidency was ratified; New York became America's city, with Rudy Giuliani as "mayor of the world." Patriotism became consumerism, dissent was discouraged, and Americans became students, newly schooled in strategic geography and Islam. Perhaps most importantly, public language (re)created a national identity.

I am an applied linguist by training and inclination. I study language as it is used in the world. And this is naturally the perspective I bring to the events of September 11. As that day began, planes flew into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Thereafter, words helped many things happen. That event was first termed an act of "terror" and then became an act of "war." "Acts of war" are typically reciprocated with other "acts of war"—but war against whom? To ask such questions is to take a critical linguistic lens to 9/11, to ask how language can be employed to render national policy common sense.

For me, these have not always been easy questions to ask, particularly in the context of tragedy. New York is my city of origin. I came of age on its streets, in its schools, in its libraries and parks. New York is a hometown, inspiring all the affections and allegiances accorded any birthplace around the globe. For me, it is important to honor the horror and loss of 9/11. Yet, New York is also a financial and cultural mecca, presumably attacked for that identity on September 11, 2001. One can examine the

latter incarnation of the city without losing sight of the former; it is possible to mourn the losses of September 11 and still ask questions about it. This book explores the use of language in developing the public understanding of, and response to, the events that surrounded 9/11.

The linguistic trajectory from the World Trade Center and the Pentagon began with silence. No state announced responsibility for the events of September 11. But America was nonetheless assured that it had an "enemy,"–a "faceless enemy" that personified "evil." And against that evil, America came to wage a "new kind of war." The first step in that war, the first target, was Afghanistan. Because Afghanistan "harbored" the "faceless enemy," bombing of Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001.

This is the short version of the story. But much had to happen in what became known as "the homeland" before the bombing could be sanctioned at home. Through emblems of patriotism, the media endorsed, and indeed helped produce, "America's New War." Through public rhetoric, a rookie president, America's first appointed president, became popularly accepted as America's military commander in chief and America's chaplain. The nation was (re)created and united, with single purpose. The targets of the attacks were established–Western democracy, "our very way of life"–and one of the physical targets, New York, became America's city. Finally, dissent was discouraged. All of this occurred before a single bomb was dropped on Afghanistan, and all of this happened through words. How this process developed is the focus of this book.

Of course, political rhetoric is designed to be deployed in the service of public policy. As the War on Terrorism was formulated, familiar images and themes contributed to the consolidation of support for the Bush administration and for its prosecution of a war in Afghanistan. This is not to say that Americans are simply dupes of governmental and media propaganda. But increasingly the media produce an immersion in carefully crafted rhetoric and imagery. It is worth the effort to explore the interaction of the complex cultural strains that ultimately aided in building a consensus around war.

All cultures have within them multiple (often conflicting) discourses. In America we find strains of deep tolerance and multiculturalism; we also find racism and xenophobia. Public rhetoric can access these various strains, using them as raw material to (re)create a national perspective around notions that–because of their cultural resonance–are widely

experienced as "common sense." In the case of the War on Terrorism, xenophobia could be used to create an intolerant "other" who supported attacks on our secular democracy. Once an "enemy" is positioned as "evil," fewer citizens are moved to inquire about "collateral damage," the precise situation for civilians "on the ground." To this day, amidst the enormous amount of discourse around the successes in Afghanistan, there is very little discussion about the human toll of the war.

The insights revealed by exploration of this rhetorical landscape are not always troubling; they can also be uplifting. Initially I had a cynical view of the deployment of the term *heroism*, as it was applied to anyone who had suffered on 9/11. But, ultimately I came to a different view—that the strain in American discourse that allowed for the broad use of that term came from a hearteningly altruistic ideology. Heroes became those who lost their lives selflessly helping others. There is much in the language of 9/11 to scrutinize and critique. And in the most difficult national moments, this is exactly what must be done. But there are also rhetorical moments that justify hope.

War of Words focuses largely on events in America immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001. More specifically, it scrutinizes a range of language (visual, oral, written) produced in the wake of 9/11. It does not address the military events in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Rather, it explores the War of Words that made those events possible. Each chapter examines a different aspect of the War of Words through a different analytic lens.

Chapter 1, "From Terror to War: The War on Terrorism": In the weeks following 9/11, a terrorist attack comes to merit the full response of the U.S. military and the creation of an unprecedented coalition of allies. This chapter addresses the question: How did a response to terror become the War on Terrorism? The goal of this chapter is to detail how the particular road taken—the construction of a nation at war—is aided through the strategic deployment of language. This chapter examines presidential rhetoric.

Chapter 2, "Becoming President" explores another rhetorical turning point: the events of September 14, 2001. On that National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, the president addressed the nation at services in the National Cathedral, then visited "ground zero" in New York City. President Clinton's chief of staff, Leon Panetta, once observed, "Part of being

president is being the nation's chaplain." This was the (rhetorical) role George W. Bush came to fulfill on that day.

Chapter 3, "From News to Entertainment: Eyewitness Accounts": In the wake of 9/11, the media was alive with survivors' tales—stories that captured horrifying events and the fortitude of those who survived them. Stories, by their nature, locate our very personal experiences within larger cultural norms and expectations. But for the televised narratives of September 11, their larger relevance was heavily constructed by reporters and the visual frames of the news media. Viewers were (re)made American through the televisual displays of the nation. This chapter examines the role of television in creating accounts of September 11 and in constructing post-9/11 identities. The chapter focuses on approaches to studying narrative as it moves from "real time" story-telling to the highly manufactured tales that appeared on news magazines and on a prime-time series. This discussion is the most linguistic in the book.

Chapter 4, "New York Becomes America(n)": Perhaps for the first time since 1790—when it ceased being the federal capital—New York became archetypically American on 9/11. On that day, New York became America. With the exception of scant coverage from the Pentagon (a military target), news coverage emanated from New York. The Twin Towers, a symbol of New York, became the symbol of "The Attack on America." The "innocent civilians" attacked as presumptive Americans were New Yorkers. This chapter explores the rhetorical construction of New York as an American city and Rudy Giuliani as America's mayor.

Chapter 5, "Selling America": Two kinds of campaigns "sold America" post-September 11. One was a manifestation of nation building as it sold America on itself. "I am an American," was probably one of the most successful public service announcements in the history of the republic. The second campaign sold America on consumerism. Both promotions turned on patriotism. One built loyalty to values of tolerance and diversity. The other conflated patriotism and consumerism in a dance of political/economic codependence, resisted (at least initially) by many. The trajectory of these promotional campaigns—from tolerance to spending—is the focus of this chapter.

Chapter 6, "'The New McCarthyism'": Along with increased patriotism, post-9/11 saw attacks on those who questioned U.S. policy. A provoking

volley was fired by the conservative American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded by Lynne Cheney, wife of the Vice President. In November, ACTA published a report listing more than 100 examples of what it claimed was a "blame America first" attitude on America's campuses. While ACTA tarred campuses as a "weak link," some on campus found the ACTA report truly sinister. "The New McCarthyism" examines the ACTA campaign and reactions to it. Part of the rhetorical analysis centers on logical fallacies.

Chapter 7, "Schooling America: Lessons on Islam and Geography": After the attack on America, made in the name of Islam, the media sought to inform an audience admittedly unacquainted with both the religion and a region that is home to more than a billion Muslims. This was not a benign travelogue of cultural and historical highpoints. Rather, instruction focused on the military, political, and economic self-interest of the United States. "Schooling America" focuses on these pedagogical moments.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

A word on transcription is in order. Linguists have their own arcane transcription conventions, which defy traditional punctuation. To make this text accessible to nonlinguists, I elected to use traditional punctuation when transcribing speech. I did, however, use a few linguistic conventions. If one speaker overlapped the talk of another, I used a square bracket "[" to indicate where that overlap began. I chose to maintain speakers' actual false starts, often indicating these with a hyphen: "word- ." Also maintained are the fillers speakers used in natural conversation, so readers will find *ahs* and *ums* sprinkled throughout. Additionally worth noting is that, for clarity's sake, some words in example texts are bolded to indicate the basis of claims and analyses. Finally, I took a decision to avoid the use of *sic* throughout the text. In the rush of the moment, many people misspeak, and it seemed uncalled for to indicate each time such an error occurred. I also found the punctuation on the White House and other Web sites somewhat idiosyncratic, but I judged it inappropriate to pepper transcripts of presidential speeches, for example, with *sic.* This book is about the way language is actually used, and I have tried to capture that sense of things in the texts that appear throughout.

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From Terror to War
The War on Terrorism

Presidential power is the power to persuade.
                              Political scientist Richard Neustadt[1]

At 8:45 a.m. EDT on the morning of September 11, 2001, an Amer-
ican Airlines jet flew into the north tower of the World Trade Center.
With the collision of a second plane, into the south tower, it became
clear that the media was not covering an accident. This was confirmed
within the hour as an American Airlines plane flew into the Pentagon
and another hijacked flight crashed south of Pittsburgh. CNN banners
screamed "Breaking News" above "America Under Attack." And for
several days thereafter, CNN announced the "Attack on America."
But the "attack" quickly became an act of war, this generation's "Pearl
Harbor." It is not the intent of this chapter or this book to speak to the
validity of this analysis. (My cousins, academic historians living in
lower Manhattan, found it impossible not to feel themselves in a war—
witnessing war crimes against innocent civilians.) Nonetheless, given
that other rhetorical and political postures were available, the goal in
this discussion is to detail how the particular road taken—the construc-
tion of a nation at war—is aided through the strategic deployment of
language.
   The perspective I will be taking is that language has consequences—
that through the use of language, we create and recreate particular
worlds of understanding. For this reason, I will sometimes be using the

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convention of parentheses when I talk about (re)creating, for example, a unified nation.

Examining presidential rhetoric in the wake of September 11, we see a terrorist attack that comes to merit the full response of the U.S. military and the creation of an unprecedented coalition of allies. This chapter addresses the question, how did a response to terror become the War on Terrorism?

First, a few words on terrorism. Unfortunately for those of us living in this electronic age, terrorism is an act made for television. Terrorism specialist Walter Laqueur notes:

> The success of a terrorist operation depends almost entirely on the amount of publicity it receives. This is one of the main reasons for the shift from rural guerrilla to urban terror in the 1960s; for in the cities the terrorist could always count on the presence of journalists and TV cameras and consequently a large audience.[2]

Terrorism feeds on the news media in a system of mutual survival. Former diplomat David Long notes: "The media's mission to cover the news and the terrorist's ability to 'create' news have led to a symbiotic relationship between the two, one in which the media not only convey the news, but help the terrorist create it." Terrorist violence succeeds in the form of "carefully planned theatrical events."[3]

Terrorist attacks are a particular challenge to a government that must create the impression that it is able to contain violence and protect its citizens. It must find a balance between appearing ineffectual and infringing on civil liberties.[4] And it needs to ensure that terrorists don't dominate the news. This creates a presidency dependent on media exposure for its own power to persuade.

In effect, the media age has transformed the very office of the U.S. presidency. Roderick Hart[5] characterizes its modern role: "the president is first and foremost a talker." Prior to the twentieth century, he reports, "presidents rarely spoke at all." But all that was to change. Between 1945 and 1975, public speeches by U.S. presidents increased almost 500%. And that figure has continued to increase.[6] Hart again: "presidential speech and action increasingly reflect the opinion that speaking *is* governing." The power of the presidency rests in its ability to persuade.

And that power and persuasion rests in access to the media and the ability to shape reporting. Even though terrorists create televised events, communications specialist Steven Livingston argues that the ability to shape reporting remains the province of the government:

> The power to shape perceptions of violent events and their principal actors (both perpetrators and victims) usually rests not with the terrorists but with government officials. Who the terrorists are in the first place is a question largely determined by these officials. Those who have routine access to the mass media, those to whom reporters turn when the dust settles and the shooting stops, have the ability to shape coverage and perceptions.[7]

Such was the office and the task on 9/11 when George W. Bush addressed the nation. Presidential speeches draw news coverage, and Bush would speak to the nation three times that first day, including a prime-time address. These speeches can be found in the Appendix to this chapter. In addition, there would be four press briefings by the White House and a statement by the press secretary. And, of course, statements by current and former government officials would fill the airwaves.

Bush's first remarks came a scant forty-five minutes after the first plane hit; he spoke for only a minute from Emma Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida.[8] In a brief statement, Bush described the events with noteworthy precision: "Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center." He also characterized the situation: "a difficult moment for America," "an apparent terrorist attack," and "a national tragedy." America was not yet at war.

In examining the next two sentences, we'll take a close look at the language used, particularly the grammatical choices. These remarks also participate in the rhetorical (re)construction of the presidential Bush. He is in control—grammatically marked as an active agent. In the following quote, note the use of the personal pronoun, *I*, and the use of the active voice as Bush marshals the full resources of the state:

> I have spoken to the Vice President, to the Governor of New York, to the Director of the FBI, and have ordered that the full resources of the federal government go to help the victims and their families,

and to conduct a full-scale investigation to hunt down and to find those folks who committed this act.

This phrasing stands in sharp contrast to comments made by Attorney General John Ashcroft later in the day.[9] His statements are grammatically "passive": "Crime scenes **have been** established by the federal authorities." And some statements have no agent: "The full resources of the Department of Justice … **are being deployed** to investigate these crimes and to assist survivors and victim families." In the president's remarks, he personally had done everything possible to help and protect the citizens.

The president is firm, "Terrorism against our nation will not stand." In pledging to find "**those folks** who committed this act" he has been both presidential and folksy. As one scholar has observed, "The presidency is still a damned informal monarchy."[10]

Grammatically, the president creates a united nation, under God. "**We've** had a **national** tragedy," he reports. In examining the use of pronouns here, we have what linguist John Wilson calls a "pronominal window into the thinking and attitudes"[11] of a political leader. Oftentimes the referent for the pronouns *we* and *you* is ambiguous (as "we'll" recall from the exhortations of "our" high school teachers to avoid their use!). There is certainly ambiguity in the phrasing by Health and Human Services Secretary Thompson later in the day: "It is now **our** mission to begin the healing from this tragedy." In contrast, Bush's "we" is the nation (re)created and united through his remarks: "Terrorism against **our nation** will not stand." Having constructed the listeners as a nation, Bush ends with a nation under God: "And now if you would join me in a moment of silence. May God bless the victims, their families, and America. Thank you very much."

With the attack on the Pentagon and the downing of Flight 93—which may have been heading for the White House—those charged with presidential security faced a dilemma. On the one hand, the president had to be kept in secure locations. On the other hand, he needed to be rhetorically visible. The president spoke again at 1:04 p.m. from Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.[12] His first task is reassurance; he begins: "I want to reassure the American people that the full resources of the federal government are working to assist local authorities to save lives and to help the victims

of these attacks." Once again, notwithstanding the president's absence from the capital, he is able to confirm that he has marshaled the full resources of the state. He is also able to reassure those for whom talking is governing: "I've been in regular contact with the Vice President, the Secretary of Defense, the national security team and my Cabinet." And that talk has worked in the service of the people's government: "we have taken the necessary security precautions to continue the functions of **your** government" and in the service of their safety: "We have taken all appropriate security precautions to protect the American people."

For those listening carefully for clues to planned military actions, there are several key phrases. The first does not seem to put the United States on a war footing: "Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts." Hunting down and punishing could indicate covert actions, leading to, for example, assassination or bringing perpetrators to justice under U.S. or international law. It could also mean formal military action. The next clue comes quickly: "We have been in touch with the leaders of Congress and with world leaders to assure them that we will do whatever is necessary to protect America and Americans." This phrasing is more ominous. When the president speaks, he governs. And the courtesies of warning allies in advance of attacks may begin to be in place.

The president is firm. Twice he says, "make no mistake." The second time can also be read in a military context, as he addresses the rhetorically unified nation: "The resolve of **our** great nation is being tested. But make no mistake: We will show the world that we will pass this test."

The Barksdale statement is similar to the first: It places the president in charge, bringing to the service of the people the resources of the state. But it expands on the single statement made earlier, "Terrorism against our nation will not stand." In the second brief statement, assurances of resolve are accompanied by assurances of action: "we will do whatever is necessary."

The president closes as he had previously, on a religious note. Just before indicating that the nation would pass the test, he thanks "the folks" who were mounting the rescue efforts, and offers a prayer for victims and families. Bush ends with "God bless."

By the evening, we had "the war on terrorism," announced in the course of a five-minute, prime-time address to the nation.[13] The president begins by characterizing the attacks. They are no longer "two airplanes [crashing] into the World Trade Center." Nor are they simply "traged[ies]." Rather, they are attacks on "our way of life."

> Good evening. Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

Within a few short lines, much has been accomplished rhetorically. A "fellow citizenry" has been invoked—united within its symbolic territory of a "way of life" and its "freedoms." To invoke those symbols is to invoke precepts for which, I daresay, most Americans would give their/ our lives. To understand how these concepts can be deployed rhetori-cally, it's necessary to say a few words about both nation and symbols.

Anthropologist Benedict Anderson[14] defines the nation as "an imag-ined political community." It is imagined, he tells us, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Moreover, national bound-aries tend to be recent, elastic, and accidental. As a philosophical entity, he argues, nation-states are rather impoverished. Nonetheless, today, all individuals on the planet are born into nations.

Literary scholar Lauren Berlant[15] (1991) explores American nation building. She argues that Americans are "inextricably bound together by America. ... because we inhabit the political space of the nation." This space is not merely legal, geographical, genetic, linguistic, or experiential, but "some tangled cluster of all of these." She calls this political space the "national symbolic"—a place that brings together all the symbols that evoke America. Following Berlant, the rhetorical terrain of September 11 can be thought of as a national symbolic site. Berlant argues that through our linguistic practices we continually (re)create the nation. And one of the goals of the national symbolic is to produce a fantasy of national inte-