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U.S. PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE, SEPTEMBER 11-20, 2011:
THE BIRTH OF THE WAR ON TERROR

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Abstract: Much of recent American history was influenced by the events of September 11, 2001. U.S. foreign policy during the two terms of President George W. Bush was shaped by five public texts issued within a few days following the terrorist attacks. This article reviews some of the opinions and critical observations on the president's rhetoric during that timeframe and attempts to provide a fresh perspective. The analysis seeks to avoid ideological and political considerations and focus on the actual language. It draws conclusions based on statistics, discourse strategy and semantics. A particular interest is reserved for the concept that defined subsequent political developments, which is the *war on terror*. My intention is to show how this choice was made, the manner in which the phrase evolved into its final form, and why it represented the most appropriate frame in terms of semantic arguments.

Key Words: 9/11, terrorist attacks, America, Bush, presidential rhetoric, terror, terrorism, war, war against terrorism, war on terror.

Preliminary Considerations

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, U.S. presidential rhetoric was widely criticized for creating a simplistic frame of good vs. evil to describe the events and justify the political and military measures that followed.

To wit, although Kellner acknowledged that “such all-out war hysteria, militarism, and extremist rhetoric was the order of the day”¹, he went on to say that “Bush notoriously used Manichean discourse to construct an “evil Other” who attacked the United States and to highlight the goodness of the United States against the scourge of terrorism, using completely binary discourse.”² Finally, one of the strongest statements he made was that “From the beginning, the Bush administration has practiced the Goebbels-Hitler strategy of the *Big Lie*, assuming that if you repeated a slogan or idea enough times the public would come to believe it, that words would become reality.”³

An additional element highlighted by critics was that presidential discourse failed to recognize “another possible frame for the attacks of 9/11: they could be seen as isolated events of madmen or as a systemic problem of the inequities of the world.”⁴

In an analysis which focused on the emotional component of President Bush’s discourse on 9/11, Loseke noted that “observers argued that these speeches did not contain memorable rhetoric and did not construct the logic or expediency of waging a war on terror.”⁵

One of the recurrent areas of criticism was directed at the reviled simplicity of the president’s rendering of the events. Thus, Simons states that “True to form, the Bush narrative presented a stripped – down account of how the 9/11 attacks came to be that left no room for moral ambiguity, or for criticism.”⁶, and that “... from the Bush administration’s perspective, its melodramatic rhetoric also had the virtue of cowing potential critics while equipping its legions of supporters and spokespersons with a simple, easily repeatable message.”⁷

Furthermore, attacks on the Bush rhetoric claimed that the president used this opportunity and the authority of his office to identify with the American people and speak on behalf of all Americans: “In his September 20 peroration, the president established a synechdocal relationship with the people. He represented our experiences, feelings, and actions and spoke of those actions in our voice.”⁸

History and facts notwithstanding, the White House discourse was also vilified because “Bush’s sense of history is, however, simultaneously unthinking and purposeful; his assumptions are widely shared because they serve the important function of idealizing and commemorating American war aims.”⁹

In a related vein, there is a sense that “Bush therefore follows presidents before him whose war rhetoric constructs America and Americans as nothing less than exemplars of morality and paragons of virtue.”¹⁰

Religion obviously played an important part in a type of discourse that focused not only on violence, but on grief and redemption, yet even the fact that it became a topic was enough to generate statements such as those issued by Gunn (“In his address to the nation on September 20, the President became an exorcist claiming righteousness [...] This stance clearly marks the brand of exorcism underway as an evangelical Protestant one more typical of the U.S. prophetic tradition.”¹¹), or by Hoogland Noon: “Indeed, the president grew accustomed to speaking of “history” as an active (even divine) force whose workings (or “callings”) are available to his own discerning eye; those who pay attention to Bush’s public comments will quickly observe that “history” and “God” are usually synonymous.”¹²

That same author went on to note that “[...] since September 2001, George W. Bush has committed himself to sustaining that “9-11 feeling,” to converting grief and nostalgia into an ongoing substitute for critical thought.”¹³, and added that “Bush’s providential certainty [...] is tempered by an unremitting emphasis on his own punctured psyche, which he uses to mirror the nation’s collective trauma.”¹⁴

Reflecting on the perception of the president as the embodiment of that quintessential would-be American hero – perhaps because of his Texas roots and demeanor – and the often-touted infantile view of America, habitual criticism also relies on pronouncements such as that which says “The events of 9/11 in particular seemed to cry out for a hyperbolic, decontextualized account of what had occurred, akin to cowboy westerns and children’s fables.”¹⁵

Past American history has always played a critical part in the construction of official rhetoric, and president Bush could not have made an exception in such tragic circumstances. Esch is right when she stipulates that

“Historical allusions have also played an important role in rhetorical legitimization of the “War on Terror”. By alluding to World War II and the Cold War, the texts have recalled past victories with longer-established mythic significance in order to portray the present war as just and winnable.”¹⁶

Perhaps no accusation was more frequent than the one which stated that in describing the facts and subsequent policies, the president reshaped the truth to serve his purpose as opposed to that of the nation:

“Remarkably, he has done so while generally avoiding obviously false statements. Instead, Bush consistently uses well-designed phrases and strategically crafted arguments to distract, deceive, and mislead.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, while criticism was widespread, some made more balanced observations on the presidential discourse that followed 9/11. Murphy acknowledged for instance that “... President Bush has done a remarkable job of defining the attacks of September 11 to his advantage and [...] his rhetoric is a key factor in his success.”¹⁸

Another remark that deserves consideration is made by Hodges, who affirms that

“Regardless of the accuracy of the assumptions and explanations that the [Bush] narrative forwards about America’s struggle against terrorism since September 11, 2001, the knowledge that it spawns serves as the truth in the sense that it produces real effects in the world.”¹⁹

Writing about the 9/11 frame in the media, Lewis and Reese inferred that

“In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration advanced a War on Terror to justify security policies at home and military intervention abroad [...]. As a rhetorical device for marshaling resources and defining the terms of debate, the War on Terror has emerged as a powerful ideological frame.”²⁰

Others however portrayed the frame and its consequences in a different light:

“The War on Terror itself [...] has become the primary threat to the well-being of Americans in the first decade of the twenty-first century. My fundamental conclusion is that the War on Terror is vastly out of proportion to the actual problems we face from terrorism and terrorist groups.”²¹

The historical perspective on the subject is still undecided. In his study, Holland claimed that in hindsight “by the end of his presidency, Bush expressed regret over elements of his foreign policy discourse, most notably the more extrem instances of his language of frontier justice.”²² At the same time, Reese had the following to say: “The War on Terror was the label assigned by the Bush administration to its national security policy, launched in response to the attacks of 9/11. The cultural construction and

political rationale supporting this slogan represent a powerful organizing principle that has become a widely accepted framing".²³

Argument

A significant part of this analysis is predicated on the assumption that the phrase *war on terror* – which was duly and persistently criticized on various ideological, political, cultural and other types of arguments – is the most appropriate choice for reasons that become apparent at the semantic level.

The official U.S. Government position on what happened on 9/11, and the political, social, economic, and cultural consequences that the events of that day would have on America and the world were shaped primarily through five speeches made by President Bush.

In chronological order, they were: i) the brief remarks made at Emma Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida at 0930 EDT, September 11, 2001; ii) the remarks made at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, at some point between 11:40 and 13:15 EDT; iii) the Address to the Nation made from the Oval Office of the White House at 2030 EDT, September 11, 2001; iv) the remarks delivered on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance from the Episcopal National Cathedral in Washington, DC, September 14, 2001; and, v) the Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People at the U.S. Capitol Building, September 20, 2001.

These five speeches, delivered within an interval of nine days, created a frame at the official discourse level that would encompass specific sub-frames for the following categories: a) the war on terror; and, b) the identity construction of the 'other'.

My focus will be on both quantitative/statistic and on qualitative analysis as the main approach in discussing the discursive strategies and lexical choices present in the five above-mentioned speeches. This will show how the positive, legitimizing *us/we* is pitted against the negative, de-legitimizing *them/they* as the other to construct the identity of the two groups. Complementing qualitative analysis will be a critical multidisciplinary approach merging linguistics and political science to assess the effectiveness of the four speeches in hindsight of the political context which followed September 11, 2001.

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis requires some preliminary considerations.²⁴ I have selected a number of key concepts/semantic groups that I considered essential in the five speeches, and which have been used with a frequency that suggests deliberate recurrence and emphasis. I then listed them in descending order of overall frequency and I broke down the numbers by each separate speech, in absolute and relative terms (i.e.

numbers and percentage) vertically. The percentage column to the right indicates the proportion of the key concept/semantic group from the total number of uses of these concepts in all the speeches. The percentage in parentheses after each separate number by speech represents the proportion in which each key concept/semantic group was used in every individual speech in reference to the total number of uses for each key concept/semantic group separately. All percentages were listed with the first two decimals only, which rendered horizontal and vertical totals slightly less than 100%.

Several observations are necessary. First, the one important notion that shows a steady increase in frequency in absolute numbers is represented by the key concept/ semantic group *we/us/our(s)*. Statistically, it ranks ahead of all other concepts, and beginning with the address to the nation on the evening of September 11, it is significantly more frequently used than the second most frequently used concept by a factor of more than two to one.

Second, the first two concepts/semantic groups, *we* and *America* represent more than half of the total in absolute and relative numbers. The emphasis on *unity* against a common threat is augmented when we add the key concepts/semantic groups of *country/nation* and *together/union/unity/join/rally*.

American values are grouped into three major key concepts/semantic groups: *God/Lord/He*; *pray/prayer*; and, *freedom/liberty*. Together, they account for a little more than one tenth of the total. *God* and *prayer* are notably more frequent in the remarks delivered at the National Cathedral, while *freedom* and *liberty* rank high in the address to the joint session of Congress.

It is very interesting to note that *terror/terrorism/terrorist(s)* ranks third overall, but the focus is the most relevant in the last of the five speeches, while *war* is next to last overall, but is prominently mentioned - once again - during that latter speech, the address to Congress.

Next we should mention the key concept generically labeled as *feelings*, which refers specifically to the emotional response of all Americans in particular, and of those around the world who sympathized with them and the victims of the attacks. These include a recurrent reference to words such as *disbelief*, *grief*, *anger*, and *resolve*. Not surprisingly, the National Day of Prayer on September 14 was the occasion for the most frequent use of these concepts.

Finally, the least frequent, albeit extremely significant in analytical terms, is the notion of *evil*. Of all the instances when it appeared in these speeches, it featured most prominently in the address from the White House and the remarks at the National Cathedral.

Compared to the assessment of absolute numbers, the picture of relative numbers tells a very different story if we compare the five speeches horizontally. The highest proportion corresponds to

terror/terrorism/terrorist(s), which in the address to Congress stands at 80.48% of all mentions, followed in the same text by *freedom/liberty*. This apparent shift in emphasis is all the more striking when we note that *we/us/our(s)* only ranks fifth in that speech in terms of comparative overall use. The ranking in the President's Address to Congress is i) *terror(ism/ist)*; ii) *freedom/liberty*; iii) *they/them*; iv) *America/U.S.*; and v) *we/us*. All of this will become relevant when we move on to the qualitative analysis of the official position on 9/11.

In conclusion, statistically the most relevant key concepts/semantic groups used in the five speeches which constitute the object of this analysis deal with: the opposition *we/us* vs. *they/them*; *America* and *American values* (i.e. American identity); *terror*; *terrorism*; and *war*. They indicate a clear focus, and a clear mission.

Key Concept/ Semantic Group	Florida 9/11	Louisiana 9/11	White House 9/11	National Cathedral 9/14	Congress 9/20	Total	% of Total Key Con- Cepts
<i>We/ Us/ Our(s)</i>	3 (1.60%)	8 (4.27%)	27 (14.4%)	49 (26.20%)	100 (53.40%)	187	36.38
<i>America/ American(s)/ U.S.</i>	2 (2.73%)	6 (8.21%)	10 (13.69)	8 (10.95%)	47 (64.38%)	73	14.20
<i>Terror/ Terrorism/ Terrorist(s)</i>	2 (4.87%)	-	5 (12.19%)	1 (2.43%)	<i>Terror</i> 10 <i>Terrorism</i> 5 <i>Terrorist(s)</i> 18 (80.48%)	41	7.97
<i>Feelings (Disbelief, Resolve, Grief, Anger, etc.)</i>	-	1 (2.70%)	4 (10.81%)	23 (62.16%)	9 (24.32%)	37	7.19
<i>They/Them/ Their(s)/Other</i>	1 (2.94%)	1 (2.94%)	7 (20.58%)	2 (5.88%)	23 (67.64%)	34	6.61
<i>Country/ Nation(al)</i>	3 (8.82%)	2 (5.88%)	4 (11.76%)	14 (41.17%)	11 (32.35%)	34	6.61
<i>God</i>	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	16 (64%)	5 (20%)	25	4.86
<i>Pray/ Prayer(s)/ Silence</i>	1 (4.76%)	1 (4.76%)	2 (9.52%)	12 (57.14%)	5 (23.80%)	21	4.08
<i>Freedom/ Liberty</i>	-	-	3 (15.78%)	2 (10.52%)	14 (73.68%)	19	3.69
<i>Together/Union/ Unity/Join/Rally</i>	1 (5.55%)	-	3 (16.66%)	5 (27.77%)	9 (50%)	18	3.50
<i>War</i>	-	-	1 (7.69%)	1 (7.69%)	11 (84.61%)	13	2.52
<i>Evil</i>	-	-	5 (41.66%)	6 (50%)	1 (8.33%)	12	2.33

"Terrorism against our nation will not stand."²⁵ This brief sentence, uttered by the President of the United States on September 11, 2001, sometime between 9:30 and 9:31 EDT live on national TV from a small room at Emma Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida contains therein the principal elements which in the course of the next nine days would create a definite direction in American national and cultural identity. The frame is set and the course is open.

These seven words emphasize some of the key concepts that have already been listed in the above quantitative analysis. They are America (*our nation*); a new age in American history (*terrorism*); resolve to overcome any and all adversities (*will not stand*); and, finally the crucial preposition *against* which will be a significant part of this assessment of American political discourse on 9/11.

The first important thing that must be said is that it took less than an hour after the first attack for official discourse to clearly predicate that: a) this was an act of terrorism; and, b) it was directed against America and all Americans. The second important thing is that the implications of these two statements would have far-reaching consequences over the national psyche and would lay the groundwork for a debate that is still underway on the issue of the manner in which the frame of 9/11 came into being, and on whether alternative options existed or not.

Sometime before 13:15 EDT during the President's brief remarks at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, the pro-active position that was evident in the earlier statement ("Terrorism [...] will not stand") shifted from impersonal to personal with emphasis on the key concepts of *we* and *America*. Twice in Louisiana on that day President Bush introduced his pronouncements with the strong imperative "make no mistake."²⁶ This was followed first by "*The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.*"²⁷, then by "*We will do whatever is necessary to protect America and Americans,*"²⁸ and finally by "*We will show the world that we will pass this test.*"²⁹ All of these utterances are powerful, determined, and resolute. *We/the United States* implies the collective will. There is no hesitation in the selection of verbs, and the repetition of *we will* suggests that there would be no dissenting views on the course of action regarded as appropriate for the nation as a whole.

Furthermore, this is the beginning of the creation of the sub-frame that is so critical to the overall frame of 9/11, namely that of the 'other'. The use of the verb *to hunt down* is extremely suggestive of the category which would become exclusive to the perpetrators of the attacks, and to their allies, supporters, and sympathizers. They are lowly beings who would be hunted down and punished, and theirs are *cowardly acts*, which merit contempt.

On the other hand, "The resolve of our great nation is being tested".³⁰ From now on, every single public official statement on 9/11 will evidence the binary opposition between good and evil that provides justification for

retaliation in the face of the terrorist threat. The qualifiers that would accompany *America, our country/our nation* will stand out as reflections of the positive values of America - and by extension of the rest of the world - in a battle with the negative traits of the evildoers.

It is also appropriate to note that the rest of the world, while not left out of the picture entirely, would bear witness to *America and Americans* demonstrating that they are willing and capable to *pass this test*.

Creation of a Frame: The War on Terror

The most relevant developments, however, begin with the Address to the Nation from the Oval Office at the White House, delivered at 20:30 EDT on September 11. By this time continued media reports and the several hours that have passed since the attacks have created enough momentum and have left enough time for the initial shock to sink in and in order for the main ideas required by a clear political message to crystallize.

We can now focus on the critical transition to the phrase that best describes the frame of 9/11.

This is the first official speech which brings to the foreground the crucial pair of nouns *terror* and *terrorism*. The first paragraph speaks about 'deliberate and deadly *terrorist* acts', and then of 'evil, despicable acts of *terror*'. The order is not irrelevant. Let us briefly discuss the two concepts.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *terror* has four main meanings, the first of which is *fear*, and only the last of which refers to *violent or destructive acts (as bombing) committed by groups in order to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands*. The distinction and - once again - the order in which they are used in the five speeches are extremely important and relevant for our further discussion. Let it be said that the second meaning is listed as **a:** *one that inspires fear*; **b:** *a frightening aspect*; **c:** *a cause of anxiety*; and, **d:** *an appalling person or thing*.³¹

The same dictionary defines *terrorism* as *the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion*.³²

At this point in the argument I must infer that White House presidential speechwriters do not only have an extremely accurate command of the English language, but that they also continuously crosscheck every single word that they use against multiple sources of reference. Consequently, their choices of words are verified and adjusted accordingly to correspond with the needs and requirements of the President of the United States to convey the message that is deemed best suited for the purpose. Careful scrutiny is involved in every aspect of drafting and delivering a prepared presidential speech or address to the nation, and we must accept that such speeches are the result of a strenuous effort of lexical and syntactical decisions, and therefore that this subsequent analysis is looking at a set of linguistic tools which is not the byproduct of hazard.

Having said that, let me return to the previous argument that the order in which the concepts of *terrorism* and *terror* were introduced in the official speech is extremely relevant. The address from the Oval Office was also the first of the speeches under analysis in which the terms *war* and *terrorism* were linked into one: "America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win this *war against terrorism*." This phrase removes any doubt about the fact that *acts of terror* are in fact *acts of war*, and that *war is inevitable*. War is now a *state of fact* - and it has an official name. That name will evolve into a different paradigm in the following days, and it will become the object of a heated political, cultural, and linguistic debate.

It is not just the war itself that the speech defines for the first time, but also the enemy: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."³³

The frame of post-9/11 has now been defined, outlined, and stated. It has divided the world in *us* vs. *them*, and in *for* us or *against* us.

Let us now return for a closer look at the link between *war*, *terror*, and *terrorism*. Of all the phrases associated with 9/11 and its aftermath, none was so frequently and heatedly analyzed, discussed, debated, criticized, and contested. Yet not one of these discussions seems to have addressed the issue beginning with semantics and *then* making the transition to the realm of cultural debate.

Each and every term of this triad plays a specific role and fulfils a specific purpose, and therefore a thorough discussion of them is warranted before any other considerations.

The noun *war* has the following definitions: **1a** (1): a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations (2): a period of such armed conflict (3): STATE OF WAR; **b**: the art or science of warfare; **c** (1) *obsolete*: weapons and equipment for war (2) *archaic*: soldiers armed and equipped for war; **2a**: a state of hostility, conflict, or antagonism; **b**: a struggle or competition between opposing forces or for a particular end 'a class war' 'a war against disease'; **c**: VARIANCE, ODDS.³⁴

For the purposes of this analysis, and for the purposes of official discourse in the context of 9/11, it is apparent from the beginning that the definition which best fits the bill is that of 'a *state of hostility, conflict, or antagonism*'. Clearly, this is not an armed conflict between states or nations, as the Administration was quick to point out. Also, it could hardly be argued that it is 'a struggle or competition between opposing forces or for a particular end'. The forces involved in this war are not in competition in the sense that both seek the same purpose in relationship with one another. In this case, the goals of one side clearly do not coincide with the goals of the other, and therefore the antagonism could not be construed as a struggle in pursuit of the same thing.

On the other hand, criticism in the United States and elsewhere around the world of the term *war* has focused on two major issues: first,

that it legitimized the enemy - in this case the terrorists, their practice of terrorism, and ultimately terror, and second, that this particular state of hostility, conflict, or antagonism cannot be resolved with the specific means of warfare. I will deal with each of these contentions separately.

It is sufficient to state at this point that throughout the hours that followed the attacks on September 11, 2001, the media was the first to use the concept of war in a wide range of semantic constructs, and that by the time the Administration addressed the issue in the President's address from the Oval Office, the frame of 9/11 had already begun to include war as an inevitable ingredient of the events of the day.

The next concept that we must discuss is *terrorism*. Its definition is very straightforward: 'the systematic use of *terror* especially as a means of coercion.'³⁵ *Terrorism* is a term that goes back to the days of the French Revolution and its *reign of terror*. Having established that crucial relationship, we must infer that it is not only evident that *terrorism* derives from the root *terror*, but that *terror* is the fundamental component that is characteristic of *terrorism*. When official discourse first declared that "Terrorism against our nation will not stand" it did refer to the use of terror, but as the scale and the implications of the terrorist attacks became more apparent there was a need to shift the focus from the use of terror to the actual concept of *terror*.

Merriam-Webster's definition of *terror* is **1**: a state of intense fear; **2a**: one that inspires fear: SCOURGE; **b**: a frightening aspect 'the terrors of invasion'; **c**: a cause of anxiety: WORRY; **d**: an appalling person or thing; especially: BRAT; **3**: REIGN OF TERROR; **4**: violent or destructive acts (as bombing) committed by groups in order to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands 'insurrection and revolutionary terror'.³⁶

The first thing that is immediately noticeable is how much more comprehensive the term *terror* is compared to *terrorism*. The second thing is that not only does it emphasize the emotional reaction to terrorism - as in intense fear, inspires fear, frightening aspect, anxiety, but it also includes inherently the very definition of *terrorism* with the added benefit of a direct affirmation of its purpose, which is to *intimidate*.

Let us now trace the evolution of the phrase that includes the elements discussed so far. During his address to the nation on the evening of September 11, President Bush referred to the attacks as 'evil, despicable acts of terror', and later in the speech stated that '[...] we stand together to win the war against terrorism.' References to either war or terror and terrorism were conspicuously absent from the remarks on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance at the National Cathedral in Washington DC on September 14. There were, however, numerous references to feelings such as grief, sorrow, anger, and also pride. The spectrum of emotions was not overlooked, and while they ranged from the painful to the redeeming, fear was not mentioned. Finally, on the evening of September 20, 2001, the

President addressed the nation and the joint session of Congress. He said that "On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an *act of war* against our country."³⁷ Further into the speech, the President made the following remarks:

"Our *war on terror* begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. [...] Some speak of an *age of terror*. [...] As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an *age of terror*; this will be an age of liberty [...] Freedom and fear are at war."³⁸

Once again, several observations are necessary. While the media had used the notions of *war*, *terror*, and *terrorism* extensively from the very first day, official discourse was relatively slow and more careful in addressing the concepts. It went through five speeches that varied in length from very brief to very long, and from almost off-the-cuff to extremely elaborate. The speeches were tweaked and refined very carefully in order to express the official stand on the events and its view of the future. A relatively limited number of key concepts were involved in shaping this view and framing the events of 9/11 in a specific manner. This manner would of course fit the purposes of official policies, but it would also outline the vision that stands behind such policies. One of the most persistent criticisms directed at the Administration's discourse since 9/11 was the careless way in which it chose to define the nature of the events, the reasons for the events, the perpetrators of the events, and the appropriate course of action for the country and the rest of the world in the aftermath of the events. Most critics contended - in hindsight - that the particular frame which the Administration chose to affirm publicly was flawed because it undermined the U.S. position around the world, and that it dealt with terrorism ineffectively and from a narrow perspective. I will address this criticism as part of the present analysis.

The next level of this analysis must focus on the two prepositions used successively to associate the concept of *war* to *terrorism*, and respectively to *terror*.

Against is defined as follows: **1a**: in opposition or hostility to 'spoke *against* his enemies'; **b**: contrary to '*against* the law'; **c**: in competition with 'racing *against* each other' **d**: as a basis for disapproval of 'had nothing *against* him'; **2a**: directly opposite: *FACING* 'she sat down just over *against* me - Daniel Defoe'; **b**: *obsolete*: exposed to; **3a**: compared or contrasted with 'profits are up *against* last year'; **4a**: in preparation or provision for 'saving *against* an uncertain future' **b**: as a defense or protection from 'a shelter *against* the cold'; **5a**: in direction of and into contact with 'knocked *against* the ropes'; **b**: in contact with 'leaning *against* the wall'; **6a**: in a direction opposite to the motion or course of: counter to 'sail *against* the wind'; **7a**: as a counterbalance to 'weighing risk *against* profit'; **b**: in exchange for 'a

lower rate *against* the dollar' **c**: as a charge on 'charged *against* her account'; **8**: before the background of 'viewed *against* the sky'.³⁹ Of these, three make perfect sense in this particular context: *in opposition or hostility to*; *in competition with*; and, *as a defense or protection from*. Interestingly enough, *opposition* and *hostility* are reminiscent of one of the primary definitions of *war* and would consequently seem almost ideally appropriate in the frame *war against terrorism*. Furthermore, should we for the purposes of this demonstration equate *war* with *we/us*, the definition of 'in competition with' is also worth considering. Finally, 'as a defense or protection from' is more than adequate to describe the post 9/11 state of fact.

On the other hand, the preposition *on* is also defined in a variety of ways that must be listed before any conclusions can be drawn: **1 a**: used as a function word to indicate position in contact with and supported by the top surface of <the book is lying *on* the table> **b**: used as a function word to indicate position in or in contact with an outer surface <the fly landed *on* the ceiling><I have a cut *on* my finger><paint *on* the wall> **c**: used as a function word to indicate position in close proximity with <a village *on* the sea><stay *on* your opponent> **d**: used as a function word to indicate the location of something <*on* the left><*on* the south side of the house><*on* the farm> **2 a**: used as a function word to indicate a source of attachment or support <*on* a string><stand *on* one foot><hang it *on* a nail> **b**: used as a function word to indicate a source of dependence <you can rely *on* me><feeds *on* insects><lives *on* a pension> **c**: used as a function word to indicate means of conveyance <*on* the bus> **d**: used as a function word to indicate presence in the possession of <had a knife *on* him> **3**: used as a function word to indicate a time frame during which something takes place <a parade *on* Sunday> or an instant, action, or occurrence when something begins or is done <*on* cue><*on* arriving home, I found your letter><news *on* the hour><cash *on* delivery> **4 archaic**: **5 a**: used as a function word to indicate manner of doing something ; often used with *the* <*on* the sly><keep everything *on* the up-and-up> **b**: used as a function word to indicate means or agency <cut myself *on* a knife><talk *on* the telephone> **c**: used as a function word to indicate a medium of expression <*on* stage><best show *on* television> **6 a**: (1) used as a function word to indicate active involvement in a condition or status <*on* the increase><*on* the lookout> (2): regularly using or showing the effects of using <*on* drugs> **b**: used as a function word to indicate involvement or participation <*on* tour><*on* the team><*on* duty> **c**: used as a function word to indicate inclusion <put it *on* the agenda> **d**: used as a function word to indicate position or status in proper relationship with a standard or objective <*on* schedule> **7 a**: used as a function word to indicate reason, ground, or basis (as for an action, opinion, or computation) <I have it *on* good authority><*on* one condition><the interest will be 10 cents *on* the dollar> **b**: used as a function word to indicate the cause or source <profited *on* the sale of stock> **c**: used as a function word to indicate

the focus of obligation or responsibility <drinks are *on* the house><put the blame *on* me> **8 a:** used as a function word to indicate the object of collision, opposition, or hostile action <bumped my head *on* a limb><an attack *on* religion><pulled a gun *on* me> **b:** used as a function word to indicate the object with respect to some disadvantage, handicap, or detriment <has three inches in height *on* me><a 3-game lead *on* the second-place team><the joke's *on* me> **9 a:** used as a function word to indicate destination or the focus of some action, movement, or directed effort <crept up *on* him><feast your eyes *on* this><working *on* my skiing><made a payment *on* the loan> **b:** used as a function word to indicate the focus of feelings, determination, or will <have pity *on* me><keen *on* sports><a curse *on* you> **c:** used as a function word to indicate the object with respect to some misfortune or disadvantageous event <the crops died *on* them> **d:** used as a function word to indicate the subject of study, discussion, or consideration <a book *on* insects><reflect *on* that a moment><agree *on* price> **e:** with respect to <go light *on* the salt> <short *on* cash> **10:** used as a function word to indicate reduplication or succession in a series <loss *on* loss>.⁴⁰

The first remark is the recurrent 'used as a function word to indicate'. At the expense of a stretch of imagination, *on* might become a function in itself, a function of a certain type of position, opposition, and juxtaposition. This type of argument would serve well in the attempt to frame two stands not only as different, but as irreconcilable. Also, the compelling argument is to position the two in a juxtaposition where the first concept is necessarily associated with the collective good and the higher moral ground, while the second is consequently associated with the collective evil and the lower, the despicable, the immoral, and the amoral. This juxtaposition is crucial for my demonstration.

I submit here that the type of opposition that is inherent to *against* is that which exists on a level playing field on which the concepts involved are of equal status and legitimize themselves through a set of equal values, ideals, and merits. On the contrary, the type of opposition that is inherent to *on* is that which exists on a slanted playing field, one where the opposing concepts find themselves locked in a set frame of irreducible antagonism. The higher moral ground is claimed and taken for granted in the name of values, ideals, and merits that have stood the test of time and which have been laid at the foundation of a type of societal structure and hierarchy viewed as inherently superior. The primary definition of the preposition *on* notwithstanding, *war* sits - or rather stands - on top of terrorism inasmuch as we associate *war* with *we*, and *terrorism* with *they*.

The second remark is that the number of possible definitions that seem to fit the purpose of this opposition is higher in the case of *on* than it is in the case of *against*. Numbers are of course factors of statistics, and statistics are important, but there is also a qualitative range in the higher number of definitions that is conspicuously missing from the limited

number of definitions that were adequate for the preposition *against*. Thus, notions such as *involvement*, *participation*, *cause*, *source*, *collision* (as an enhancement to *opposition* and *hostility*), *focus of action* or *directed effort*, and *focus of feelings*, *determination*, or *will* provide a wider scope and better grasp of additional semantic emphasis, which the preposition *against* seems to lack.

The third remark is unrelated to the definitions of the two prepositions, but it is extremely relevant in context. Against critics of the 'war on' terminology stands a long list of similar constructs, such as the *War on Poverty*, the *War on Cancer*, the *War on Drugs*, or the *War on Crime*. These are typically American and none was ever contested on the grounds that it might have legitimized poverty, or drugs, or crime. Naming, defining, and framing the object of opposition, or the enemy for that matter, was not meant to legitimize, and it does not do so. It does, however, provide a frame within which efforts to eradicate, cure, or fight societal ills or ruthless enemies find a sense of direction and a sense of purpose: "We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found *our mission* and *our moment*."⁴¹

Therefore, *war* is inevitable, as it is a result of an *act of war* against us. *War* is one of the most obvious recurrent concepts very early on during the first few hours after the first attacks, both in the media and in political discourse. Even that part of the public that expressed opinions in the media against a U.S.-waged war as retaliation seemed to acknowledge that the attacks were the result of a deliberate act of terrorism, and that such an attack against the American people and the nation as a whole is a crime of unprecedented proportions. Critics still debate whether that must under any and all circumstances be equivalent to an act of war, but the fact is that beyond the intellectual debate, the public sentiment was clearly in favor of the idea that indeed it was. Next, the preposition *on* and the noun *terror* both encompass more meanings than the alternatives *against* and *terrorism*, while including the meanings of the latter and expanding their scope and purpose.

An additional level of criticism was directed at the choice of *terror* over *terrorism*. Critics suggested that the Administration's goal in the aftermath of 9/11 was to instill a feeling of fear among Americans in order to justify its policies that included military retaliation, that fear is being constantly inserted in political discourse as a reminder that the terrorist threat would not go away overnight, and therefore that the nation must stand united behind the President.

The first thing that can be done to refute this type of criticism is to refer to the dictionary once again. In the White House vision, this war is not just about the *systematic use of terror*, but about the need to not give in to a *state of intense fear*. Time and time again, official discourse hammered home the notion that America and Americans must not live in fear after 9/11, that the best thing that the nation and the people can do is to move

on with their lives and refuse to be frightened into submission to terror. To declare war on terror is to stand up not only to the *practice* of terror, but to *terror* itself. The implication that fear is the feeling that public discourse intends to disseminate to pursue political goals is further denied by several logical arguments. One is the repeated references to national resolve, pride, and defiance. That is hardly conducive to fear, and it would be un-American to the point of political extinction. No American president has ever done otherwise. Another is the explicit statement that "freedom and fear are at war [...]. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war", ⁴² with the implicit but obvious identification of *America* with *freedom* and *justice*, and of *fear* and *cruelty* with the perpetrators of *terror*.

Next in line is a subtle yet extremely powerful argument which critics have either chosen to ignore or overlooked altogether. In his remarks on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, President Bush quoted Franklin Roosevelt when he said that what Americans felt at times of great national tragedy was "the warm courage of national unity."⁴³ The impact of this is threefold: first, a Republican President recalling the words of a Democratic President at a time of crisis is a clear indication of the overwhelming need for national unity, and an act of admirable deference; second, it provides a clear message that the country will stand united just as it did after Pearl Harbor, another tragedy of epic proportions that is inextricably linked to FDR; third, and finally, it is yet again an implicit, but unmistakable and direct reference to the fact that Americans will not contemplate fear. It was, after all, Franklin Delano Roosevelt who said these famous words, albeit in a different political context, during his first Inaugural Address in 1933: "[...] let me assert my firm belief that *the only thing we have to fear is fear itself* - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified *terror* [...]."⁴⁴ President Roosevelt was of course in his turn quoting Francis Bacon, who in his essay on Tribute said: "Nothing is to be feared by fear itself. Nothing grievous but to yield to grief."⁴⁵

Let me also mention that during the address at the National Cathedral, President Bush used yet another phrase to emphasize the concept of *terror*:

"This is a unity of every faith and every background. [...] Our unity is a kinship of grief and a steadfast resolve to prevail against our enemies. And this *unity against terror* is now extending across the world."⁴⁶

Therefore, we have the following chronological order for phrases used in these five speeches that bring up the key concepts of *war*, *terror*, and *terrorism*: *acts of terror*; *war against terrorism*; *unity against terror*; *act of war*; *war on terror*, *age of terror*. *Acts of terror* and *act of war* refer to the September 11, 2001 attacks. *Age of terror* is a term that is not endorsed, but refuted by President Bush. Finally, *war against terrorism*, *unity against terror*,

and *war on terror* illustrate the gradual transition to the terminology that was deemed best to describe the Administration's framing of the aftermath of 9/11.

Discourse Strategies

The next level of the analysis must concentrate on the way in which these American values and ideals are reflected in the speeches and are linked to the concept of *we/us/our(s)*. This particular aspect is essential in outlining the official vision of American national and cultural identity. From the outset, the concept is linked to powerful qualifiers, in a melting pot ranging from compassion to resilience : "our great nation"; "we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity"; "we responded with the best of America"; "the daring"; "the caring"; "American resolve"; "our nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger"; "our fellow Americans are generous and kind, resourceful and brave"; "America is a nation full of good fortune"; "the decency of a loving and giving people"; "America is successful because of the hard work, and creativity, and enterprise of our people."

Moreover, identity is imbued with the sense of American Exceptionalism: "*Our purpose as a nation is firm*", and "[...] *our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.*"⁴⁷ To compound the assertive nature of Americanness, the remarks at the National Cathedral declare openly:

We see our national character in rescuers working past exhaustion, in long lines of blood donors, in thousands of citizens who have asked to work and serve in any way possible. And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice [...] In these acts and many others, Americans showed a deep commitment to one another and an abiding love for our country.⁴⁸

The emerging post 9/11 American identity shares new and old traits, as evidenced in this quote from the address to Congress:

Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. [...] I ask you to uphold the values of America, and remember why so many have come here. We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, American values and ideals could not be fully and completely defined unless it would be in the context of the world as a whole:

"This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the *world's* fight. This is *civilization's* fight. This is the fight of all who believe in *progress* and *pluralism*, *tolerance*, and *freedom*."⁵⁰

The distinction, the division, the fault lines are stated clearly and leave no room for doubt:

"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."⁵¹

There is a constant back and forth movement between America and the world, between the American values and ideals that are shared by a part of the rest of the world, and the world that rejects them. While America will seek the solidarity of other nations, it will feel compelled to defend its values and ideals regardless of the support that it would receive. In a direct statement to the U.S. military, the President says: "The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud."⁵²

The sense of mission - and the sense of exceptional undertaking in the name of America - is evident once again, and it is more than just emphatic. It is an act of faith, both literally and figuratively. It identifies America with divine will and divine justice from a position of strength, resolution, and divine grace. It also creates a direct link between the American people and the American President as their elected representative, by the will of the people:

Our nation - this generation - will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. [...] *We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. [...] I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent [...]* In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America.⁵³

The choice of the verbs - *to tire, to falter, to fail, to yield, to rest, to relent* - is not an accident, and neither is the use of the negative here. The impact is far greater and much more powerful than if affirmative sentences had been used. Submission is not a choice, and it will not be contemplated. It is interesting to note the trinity that is present in this paragraph:

nation/country, leader, God. There is a very strong implication here that the lineage is direct, and that the right is divine: for the nation to prevail, for the leader to rule, and for divinity to bestow grace upon them. The right of the leader is not divine in a religious sense here, as there is a clear and constitutional separation between church and state in the United States, and that separation is taken very seriously. Rather, the right to rule is seen as divine as it derives from the people as *one nation under God*. Church and state may be separated at the constitutional level, but relationship with God is strong and invoked in times of crisis in a very compelling manner.

Construction of identity in the speeches is strongly rooted in the opposition of good vs. evil: "Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America [...]." ⁵⁴ Once more, the opposing sides do not exist on a level moral playing field, and the difference in strength is openly stated: "America stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time." ⁵⁵ Collective identity is defined as a list of traits to which the American people can relate:

They are the names of men and women who began their day at a desk or in an airport, busy with life.

They are the names of people who faced death and in their last moments called home to say, be brave and I love you.

They are the names of passengers who defied their murderers and prevented the murder of others on the ground.

They are the names of men and women who wore the uniform of the United States and died at their posts.

They are the names of rescuers -- the ones whom death found running up the stairs and into the fires to help others. ⁵⁶

Furthermore, there is a constant need to relate such redeeming characteristics to the perception of Americans and America by the rest of the world:

In this trial, we have been reminded and the world has seen that our fellow Americans are generous and kind, resourceful and brave.

We see our national character in rescuers working past exhaustion, in long lines of blood donors, in thousands of citizens who have asked to work and serve in any way possible.

And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice:

[...]

In these acts and many others, Americans showed a deep commitment to one another and an abiding love for our country.

[...]

They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender, and the commitment of our Fathers is now the calling of our time.⁵⁷

Imprinting the image of evil in political discourse has apparently never been more forceful since the days of World War II. The "evil empire" rhetoric of the Cold War evidenced a mere ideological divide. In the aftermath of September 11, that divide is compounded by more, and while the speeches are careful to distinguish between Islam and Islamic extremists, overtones of a religious nature are unavoidable. On one hand, they are invoked to seek divine support and comfort for America, and on the other to outline differences.

Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber -- a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa.

These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us, because we stand in their way.

We are not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions -- by abandoning every value except the will to power -- they follow in the path of

fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.⁵⁸

Finally, the divide is defined not as pitting one civilization against another, but as civilization as a whole - to include all political and religious beliefs that do not employ terrorism as a means to an end - against anyone who does. This is a crucial point, which again commentators have missed entirely, chose not to discuss, or misinterpreted. It refutes - at least from the standpoint of official discourse - Huntington's clash of civilizations theory. Beyond the term *crusade*, which was briefly used in only one instance, and then quickly obliterated from public discourse in the wake of protest, it is the single most critical point of contention in the effort to construct - and deconstruct - irreconcilable difference and opposition.

"This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."⁵⁹

Conclusions

The choice between *war against terrorism* and *war on terror* in President Bush's five speeches between September 11 and September 20, 2001 was made gradually, carefully, and deliberately. It was linguistically consistent with current usage (*war on poverty*, *war on cancer*, *war on drugs*, or *war on crime*), it was politically commensurate with the scope that the Administration would envision in terms of its policies on terrorism, and it was culturally congruous with a set of American values and ideals that were not only perceived to be superior to those of the *other*, but were affirmed, asserted, and stated as such.

Notes:

¹ Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror'", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 4 (2007): 624.

² Kellner, 626.

³ Kellner, 639.

⁴ J. Maggio, "The Presidential Rhetoric of Terror: The (Re)Creation of Reality Immediately after 9/11", *Politics & Policy*, (2007): 822.

⁵ Donileen R. Loseke, "Examining Emotion as Discourse: Emotion Codes and Presidential Speeches Justifying War", *The Sociological Quarterly*, 3 (2009): 498.

⁶ Herbert W. Simons, "Rhetoric's Role in Context, Beginning with 9/11", *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2 (2007): 185.

- ⁷ Simons, 186.
- ⁸ John M. Murphy, "Our Mission and Our Moment": George W. Bush and September 11th", *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 4 (2003): 622.
- ⁹ David Hoogland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory", *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 3 (2004): 346.
- ¹⁰ Loseke, 506.
- ¹¹ Joshua Gunn, "The Rhetoric of Exorcism: George W. Bush and the Return of Political Demonology", *Western Journal of Communication*, (2004): 12-13.
- ¹² Hoogland Noon, 356.
- ¹³ Hoogland Noon, 357.
- ¹⁴ Hoogland Noon, 357.
- ¹⁵ Simons, 185.
- ¹⁶ Joanne Esch, "Legitimizing the "War on Terror": Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric", *Political Psychology*, (2010): 377.
- ¹⁷ Ben Fritz et al., *All the President's Spin: George W. Bush, the Media, and the Truth*(New York: Touchstone, 2004), 4.
- ¹⁸ Murhpy, 608.
- ¹⁹ Adam Hodges, *The "War on Terror" Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
- ²⁰ Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese, "What is the War on Terror? Framing Through the Eyes of Journalists". *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 1 (2009): 85.
- ²¹ Ian Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2006), 6.
- ²² Jack Holland, *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses After 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 173.
- ²³ Stephen D. Reese and Seth C. Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror: The Internalization of Policy in the U.S. Press", *Journalism*, 6 (2009): 777.
- ²⁴ See a similar evaluation in Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- ²⁵ George W. Bush, Remarks at Emma Booker Elementary School, 9/11/2001. (i) <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911florida.htm>
- ²⁶ George W. Bush, Remarks at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, on the Terrorist Attacks, 9/11/2001. (ii) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58056>
- ²⁷ Bush, (ii)
- ²⁸ Bush, (ii)
- ²⁹ Bush, (ii)
- ³⁰ Bush, (ii)
- ³¹ Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terror>.
- ³² Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrorism>.
- ³³ George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks, 9/11/2001. (iii) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58057>
- ³⁴ Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war>.
- ³⁵ See note 32.

³⁶Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terror>.

³⁷George W. Bush, “An Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 9/20/2001”, (v) <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/bush-an-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress-speech-text/>

³⁸Bush, (v)

³⁹Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/against>.

⁴⁰Dictionary and Thesaurus – Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/on>.

⁴¹Bush, (v)

⁴²Bush, (v)

⁴³Bush (v)

⁴⁴Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Inaugural Address 1933, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/>

⁴⁵Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

⁴⁶Bush, (v)

⁴⁷Bush, (v)

⁴⁸Bush, (iv)

⁴⁹Bush, (v)

⁵⁰Bush, (v)

⁵¹Bush, (v)

⁵²Bush, (v)

⁵³Bush, (v)

⁵⁴Bush, (iii)

⁵⁵Bush, (v)

⁵⁶Bush, (iv)

⁵⁷Bush, (iv)

⁵⁸Bush, (v)

⁵⁹Bush, (v)

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Bush, George W. An Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 9/20/2001. (v) <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/bush-an-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress-speech-text/> (accessed on September 20, 2007)

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