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# Epideictic Rhetoric in the Service of War: George W. Bush on Iraq and the 60th Anniversary of the Victory Over Japan

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## **Epidictic Rhetoric in the Service of War:**

### **George W. Bush on Iraq and the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory Over Japan**

**Denise M. Bostdorff**

*This essay explores the relationship between epidictic discourse and war through the analysis of George W. Bush's August 20, 2005, address at the Naval Air Station near San Diego, ostensibly to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allied victory over Japan. Moreover, the case serves as an exemplar for how the president routinely interwove epidictic appeals with collective memories of World War II in order to promote the Iraq war and to deflect criticism of his policies there. Bush praised the greatest generation and linked it to the current generation; blamed and dehumanized enemies of the past and present; advocated for war based on "lessons" from the past; and reinforced a shared identity to instill both obligation and confidence.*

*Keywords: epidictic rhetoric, collective memory, George W. Bush, Iraq, World War II, war*

**The flag is hung. The trumpet sounds its mournful call. Heroes publicly accept awards conferred for valor, while leaders draw on history and communal values to urge citizens "always to remember" and "to continue the effort," lest the nation's sacrifice of lives and treasure be in vain. Throughout history, the activity of war has been immersed in ritualistic ceremony of various kinds. Indeed, leaders during war have habitually called ceremony into service to fulfill their persuasive ends and, as this essay will argue, presidential ceremonial rhetoric—that is, epidictic rhetoric—has played an important role in attempts to justify and maintain support for war, particularly in the face of public opposition, as in the case of Bush and Iraq.**

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**Aristotle was the first to use the term epideictic—referring to a speech of praise and/or blame—which he superimposed upon three distinct rhetorical forms: the enkomion, an oration that praised what the audience should emulate; the pangyric, an address or, sometimes a pamphlet, circulated before a festival that explicitly asked for deliberative action to be taken immediately; and the Athenian funeral oration, which served both to commemorate war dead and to reinforce the community’s sense of identity and commitment to a military cause (Schiappa and Timmerman, 1999).** Although Aristotle’s system was creative, it was also highly Platonic since he worked deductively from idealized forms rather than inductively generating his categories from actual speeches (Haskins, 2004). Moreover, Haskins noted that Aristotle’s abstract categories disregarded how the unique characteristics of each speech situation called for rhetors to be creative in their work. In particular, Aristotle overlooked a point that both Isocrates and Plato recognized quite well: the “politically inventive capacity” of epideictic performance (Haskins, 2004, pp. 7-8; also Poulakos, 1987, 1997).

What continues to make epideictic discourse a particularly appealing rhetorical choice for contemporary political leaders is that it persuades on deliberative questions but without seeming to do so (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Crable & Vibbert, 1983). Audiences do not typically attend a groundbreaking ceremony or listen to a eulogy with the idea that speakers will attempt to persuade them on a matter of public policy. As a result, listeners’ defenses may be down, making them more open to epideictic rhetoric and the deliberative directions that it supports. Furthermore, journalists and others who interrupt presidential epideictic discourse with questions and criticisms will find themselves under attack and their queries unanswered since disrupting a public ceremony is considered the height of rudeness. This, too, increases the potential for

audience members to be swayed by the subtle deliberative moves of epideictic messages, a point that contemporary presidents appear to have recognized quite well. According to Hart (1987), Reagan frequently appeared in ceremonial settings during his White House years and presidents Kennedy through Reagan gave speeches in ceremonial settings twice as often proportionally as Truman and Eisenhower.

In this essay, I analyze the epideictic message of a more recent U.S. president, George W. Bush, given on August 30, 2005, at the Naval Air Station on North Island near San Diego, ostensibly to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allied victory over Japan. More specifically, I examine this speech both as an exemplar for the way in which Bush typically interwove epideictic appeals with collective memories of World War II in order to promote the Iraq war and as a case study to shed light on the inextricable intertwining of epideictic rhetoric and war.

This analysis should prove useful for several reasons. First, while scholars have noted George W. Bush's penchant for ceremonial discourse in response to the 9/11 attacks (Bostdorff, 2003; Murphy, 2003), no one has yet examined how the president continued to rely on epideictic settings and rhetorical forms in order to bolster support for the war and to counter criticisms of it once the war was underway.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Olson (2006) suggested that epideictic, rather than deliberative, argument might better explain how the Bush administration initially made the case for war, and she urged communication scholars to give epideictic rhetoric the critical attention that it deserves. George W. Bush provides a compelling opportunity for such study, as he engaged in ceremonial discourse to a degree unprecedented during past U.S. wars. The president talked about the Iraq war in commencement addresses, Memorial Day messages, posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor presentations, and in highly epideictic occasions before favorable

crowds, such as July 4<sup>th</sup> orations to U.S. troops or the celebration of democracy before the National Endowment for Democracy in light of the impending vote on the Iraqi constitution.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Bush used epideictic rhetoric to promote the war in the commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day in 2004, the dedication of the National World War II Memorial in 2004 and the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in 2005, the tribute to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V-J Day also in 2005, the commemoration of the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in 2006, and a visit to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, in 2008.<sup>3</sup> While this list of ceremonial speeches is far from an exhaustive inventory of Bush's efforts, it does point to his steadfast employment of the epideictic. War rhetoric, by its nature, is deliberative in arguing for war and epideictic in casting war as an honorable policy (Murphy, 1992; also Campbell & Jamieson, 1990; Dow, 1989). Bush's war rhetoric, as in his speech at North Island, however, largely veered toward the latter in lieu of the former, thus inviting our attention.

Second, this study's focus on the epideictic nature of Bush's discourse sheds light on the persuasive appeal of his World War II analogies brought into service to promote the war in Iraq. Noon (2004) examined the allure of World War II analogies for members of the American public, traced Bush's adoption of World War II metaphors prior to his becoming president, and surveyed ten instances in which the president made use of such analogies in the aftermath of September 11 (also see: Bostdorff, 2003; Murphy, 2003) or in regard to the Iraq war. To extend Noon's work, the current study looks at the role of World War II as part of an explicitly epideictic address and examines how the president invoked and sustained this historic analogy throughout an entire message to serve his persuasive ends. Aristotle linked the epideictic to *phantasia*—a mental image or imagination—and, according to O'Gorman (2005), Aristotle further argued that the way to amplify a virtue or make it visible in the minds of listeners was to

employ comparison or contrast, such as that which analogy brings. The epideictic form, in short, is what allowed Bush to use World War II as a source of argument so easily, and we cannot fully understand the President's use of this analogy without also understanding better the epideictic nature of the larger messages in which these analogies appeared.

Moreover, this case study permits an exploration of the relationship between epideictic discourse and war. President Bush gave his speech at North Island at a time when many citizens had begun to raise questions about his war policies and, with the breaking of the levees in New Orleans just two days earlier (MacCash & O'Byrne, 2005), his domestic policies, as well. Like wartime presidents before him, Bush turned to epideictic rhetoric as a means of bolstering his leadership and deflecting criticism when public opposition arose (e.g., Johnson, 1967a, 1967b, 1968; Nixon, 1970, 1971a, 1971b). Vivian (2009) attempted to isolate particular characteristics of epideictic discourse that appeared to "help or hinder the work of intrastate conflict resolution" by examining speeches such as those of Vaclav Havel at the start of the Czech Republic and Slobodan Milosevic prior to the outbreak of civil war in the former Yugoslavia (p. 87). Along these same lines, the current study uses the case of Bush at North Island to examine the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric that may provide wartime presidents with a refuge from criticism and a means to reinforce solidarity. Additionally, this analysis of the President's address and reactions to it sheds light on the danger that such epideictic rhetoric may pose to our polity, as well points of vulnerability that dissenters to war might exploit.

The significance of war generally and the Iraq war specifically also calls for an analysis of the rhetoric that President Bush used to sustain support for his policies. As of January 2010, 4,287 U.S. soldiers had died in Iraq, while another 30,182 American soldiers had been wounded ("U.S. Casualties," 2010). Meanwhile, Iraq Body Count has reported that during the first seven

years of the war, 95,775 to 104,481 Iraqi civilians have died in the violence (Iraq Body Count, 2010). Beyond the tragic loss of life, the Iraq war has cost the United States more than \$715 billion dollars (National Priorities Project, 2010), which does not include future health care costs for veterans, and the war has severely damaged U.S. foreign relations. By examining Bush's address at North Island, we can better understand how the president encouraged so many Americans to support such a major foreign policy debacle and, further, gain insight into why Americans may be so prone to act, in Burke's words, "in conformity with the mistaken heroics of war" (1984, n. pag.).

In the pages that follow, I first examine the persuasive functions of epideictic discourse and how it may be a particularly apt means for presidential rhetors who wish to draw strategically on collective memory to advance themselves and their policies in times of war. I then turn to the analysis of George W. Bush's address on August 30, 2005, commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allied victory over Japan, a case study that sheds light on both the President's Iraq war rhetoric and the allure of epideictic appeals on behalf of war.

### **Epideictic Rhetoric, Collective Memory, and War**

Audiences often crave epideictic rhetoric because it performs the essential functions of defining/understanding, shaping/sharing of community, and displaying/entertaining. First, epideictic discourse employs a community's central values and beliefs to explain and provide an understanding of troubling issues (Condit, 1985). In particular, an unexpected tragedy or time of crisis calls for leaders in the community to explicate the meaning of such events. The Puritan ministers' jeremiads did so in the face of crop failures, droughts, fires, and epidemics (Bercovitch, 1978; Miller, 1958; Stout, 1986), just as Bush's rhetoric attempted to make sense of the 9/11 attacks.

A second important function of epideictic discourse is the shaping/sharing of community (Condit, 1985). Whether part of an inauguration, a dedication, an award ceremony, or a eulogy, epideictic rhetoric helps bind the community together through an affirmation of shared values that serves to reinvigorate civil religion. During national crises, the need for a shared sense of identity is especially keen. As Pickering and Kehde (1997, p. 3) remarked, “In times of change or crisis, nations look to the past and infer a narrative that erases all confusion and contradiction, which is not presented as history but as a figuration of essential Britishness, Americanness, Germanness, Indianness, as the case may be—a mythical national unity that, Platonic fashion, has presumably always existed” (also see Mackin, 1991). Despite the apparent permanence of such narratives, they actually are quite fluid, for rhetors—in keeping with the character of epideictic rhetoric—choose which narratives they wish to promote and which values and heroes they want to privilege. Rhetors may even define the community by contrasting the nation’s citizens with others who come from outside it (Condit, 1985). U.S. presidents, for instance, are fond not only of declaring what Americans are, but also—through depictions of enemies and others—what they are not. In this way, epideictic discourse and the ceremonial rituals that frequently accompany it serve to provide, in Jasinski’s words, both “cultural continuity and social hegemony” (1997, p. 78; also Jasinski, 2001).

The third function of epideictic rhetoric is display/entertainment, wherein speakers demonstrate their eloquence through ceremonial messages and the audience, in turn, both enjoys the performance and assesses the speakers’ eloquence as evidence of their leadership (Condit, 1985). Hart (1987) hypothesized that the rapid increase in ceremonial speaking among contemporary presidents may, in fact, be due to the “ever-increasing need to *display leadership*” (p. 54, his emphasis). **If so, epideictic discourse provides an ideal form by which to do so.**

**Ceremonial messages allow rhetors to associate with societal ethics and thereby enhance their images. During times of uncertainty or crisis, the desire for leadership and, hence, the desire for epideictic rhetoric may be particularly acute.**

To explain an event, renew a sense of community, and demonstrate their leadership, epideictic rhetors often turn to the resources of *memoria* or shared recollections of the past (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990). Collective memory, however, is not the same as history. Certainly, history is rhetorical in nature, composed as it is of narratives and arguments that can be influenced by historians' times and values (Blair, 1992; Gronbeck, 1998; Megill & McCloskey, 1987; Turner, 1998). Nonetheless, as Hasian and Frank (1999) put it, "Histories are those punctuations of time that have been accepted by the majority of intellectual communities as an authentic record of past events." Conversely, "Collective memories. . . are the public acceptances or ratifications of these histories on the part of broader audiences" (p. 98). Collective memory draws upon history, but it does so selectively. In some cases, epideictic rhetors may utilize a well-known collective memory as a means of enhancing their image, as in the case of Clinton and the anniversary of the March on Washington (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000), while other rhetors may use collective memory in epideictic discourse in an attempt to alter the audience's understanding of the past. Reagan, for instance, employed ceremonial rhetoric to appropriate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s memory and cast him as an opponent of affirmative action (Bostdorff & Goldzwig, 2005; also see: Browne, 1999; Jasinski, 1997; Wills, 1992). Underlying both types of endeavor is the epideictic invocation of collective memory for political ends. Moreover, the further back in time that an event occurred, the more the epideictic rhetor benefits from presumption, for audiences too young to have experienced events firsthand are likely to accept collective memory as an accurate rendering of events and, over time, even those who

lived through an event may find their recollections shaped by narratives of collective memory (Pickering, 1997). During times of crisis, epideictic rhetors may be especially tempted to draw upon collective memories as a way of uniting an audience that is highly fragmented both demographically and attitudinally (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). The renewal of shared identity becomes, in Dickinson's words, "the creative performance of memory" (1997, p. 5).

Even before 9/11, the narrative of one particular historic period, World War II, dominated popular media: Tom Brokaw's popular books on the greatest generation in 1998 and 1999; Spielberg's movie *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998; *Ryan* star Tom Hanks' fundraising efforts, beginning in 1999, on behalf of a World War II memorial in Washington, DC; the opening of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans in 2000; the film *Pearl Harbor* in the summer of 2001; and, on Sunday, September 9, just two days prior to the 9/11 attacks, the widely-advertised premiere of a mini-series, *Band of Brothers*, based on historian Stephen Ambrose's book of the same name, that reverently told the story of the 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division of the U.S. Army during World War II. In many ways, these popular narratives were epideictic efforts in their own right, for they praised the greatest generation and pointed to its members' virtues as civic lessons for the generations that followed. At the same time, they exhibited collective memory's tendency to draw selectively on history, in this case often overlooking any shortcomings of the greatest generation and romanticizing both their actions and the war itself (Bostdorff, 2003; also see Biesecker, 2002).

In the days immediately after 9/11, comparisons between World War II and the current situation immediately began to arise, all focused on one question, sometimes asked explicitly and other times implied: Did baby boomers and generation Xers have the character and courage

needed to defeat terrorism, just as the greatest generation had conquered fascism? President Bush was quick to answer that question, invoking World War II to urge both younger generations and their elders to renew the national covenant by meeting the terrorist threat (Bostdorff, 2003; Murphy, 2003; Noon, 2004). The way that he did so was almost entirely through epideictic rhetoric (Bostdorff, 2003; Murphy, 2003). In the years that followed—as Bush led the nation in the war on terror and then the war in Iraq—he continued to demonstrate a penchant for the epideictic and for invoking collective memories of World War II as a way to reap the potential strategic advantages of all epideictic: to enhance his presidential image; to deflect public criticism; to support his deliberative arguments for the war in Iraq; and to conduct these persuasive efforts unobtrusively through a rhetorical form that, for many, **has long inspired reverence and appeared devoid of political machinations in the context of war (e.g., Pericles, 1906; Lincoln, 1863)**. Indeed, epideictic rhetoric—drawing on collective memory as it often does—may prove particularly attractive to wartime presidents for several reasons.

First, war itself is immersed in aesthetics, as is epideictic. **Psychologist James Hillman** (2004, p. 148) observed that war and love go hand in hand, as in the “terrible love that breaks out in mourning,” the love of comrades that prompts acts of courage, the love of war itself displayed by individuals who repeatedly volunteer for dangerous duty, and the love that **so many** citizens have for wartime leaders, **a perspective with which former war correspondent Chris Hedges (2003) concurred**. According to military historian **Martin van Creveld (2008, pp. xi, xiv)**, the “culture of war” involves “play, decoration, and affectations of every sort” and remains significant for “the critical role it plays in overcoming men’s natural inclination to avoid, or flee from, danger while at the same time preparing them to make the supreme sacrifice

**if and when required.” Van Creveld posited that while many feminists and opinion leaders in the developed world denounce militarism—and, in his view, undermine military preparedness—books, movies, video games, and interest in outbreaks of war suggest that war’s opponents have not succeeded in extinguishing its culture.** As part of this culture, war rhetoric engages in “aesthetic excess” to glorify war and hide its brutality. Hillman noted, “From the first salute in boot camp to the last decoration, a love for aesthetics is on parade” (p. 166; also see van Creveld 85-247). **Society’s dominant messages about war**—whether Brady’s Civil War photographs, Hollywood films, news footage of the staged toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue, TV programs, or, I would add, presidential rhetoric—further contribute aestheticized images of war. Hillman explained, “The staged image is more persuasive emotionally, more fully actualized, and more enduring in memory than reportage” (p. 131). In wartime epideictic oratory, presidents can draw upon collective memories, shaped as they are by aesthetic messages, to link the current war with a favored past. The ceremonial setting and the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric can also depict the present armed conflict in ways that make it seem beautiful and that exploit the love inherently involved with war both to gain solidarity and to quash dissent. Little wonder, then, that Campbell and Jamieson (2008) concluded that strategic misrepresentation “plays an unusually significant role” in presidential war messages (p. 242). As a “rhetoric of display” (Prelli, 2006, p. 2), epideictic may be especially prone to creating images that can, in the context of war, deceive.

Additionally, epideictic war rhetoric emphasizes a threat posed by outside enemies in ways that dehumanize the targets of U.S. military attacks while inflating self-perceptions of virtue and thereby encouraging Americans to rally around the president and his policies. Although presidents might cast aspersions on enemies in epideictic rhetoric about domestic

issues, they risk creating internal dissension by doing because it is far harder to locate a tangible villain who is not part of “us” (Bostdorff and O’Rourke, 1997).<sup>4</sup> **One is hard put to imagine, for example, a ceremonial message reflecting on an oil spill in which the president repeatedly portrayed oil companies as evil corporations, bent on the ruin of the United States. Regardless of these companies’ culpability and incompetence, a significant number of Americans work for oil companies and/or businesses intertwined with them or know someone who does, all of which makes citizens less likely to accept such simplistic depictions.** Conversely, most Americans can draw on decidedly less knowledge about foreign affairs and personal experience abroad to refute presidential portrayals of foreign enemies, which gives presidents greater license to employ the embellishments of wartime epideictic rhetoric—and the collective memories on which it may draw—effectively (also see Denton, 1982; Windt, 1973). Through images of external enemies, presidents can displace the nation’s sins and fears onto someone else, justify the most violent of measures, and reassure citizens that U.S. motives are entirely virtuous (Bostdorff, 1994; Finlay, Holsti, & Fagen, 1967; Ivie, 1974, 1980; Ivie & Giner, 2007), which is far more difficult to do with internal enemies.

Finally, the intersection of war and ceremony in epideictic rhetoric is particularly attractive to presidents because it puts them in a position of maximum control while relegating the audience to a role of relative passivity. Audiences of all epideictic discourse serve as judges of the orator’s performance, as noted earlier. The aesthetics of war heighten the impression of performance, while reinforcing the sense that listeners should not interrupt a serious public ceremony. Furthermore, Hauser (1999) added that “epideictic occupies a unique place in celebrating the deeds of exemplars who set the tone for civic community and the encomiast [who] serves an equally unique role as a teacher of civic virtue” (p. 14). Certainly, the role of

student positions the audience of epideictic rhetoric to be deferential, while the role of teacher conveys greater credibility and agency to the speaker. The subject of war further amplifies this inequality since Americans are prone to defer to their commander-in-chief on issues of war and peace, part of what Hillman called the love of leader that arises during war (Windt, 1990; also Hillman, 2004). Because wartime presidential rhetors uphold soldiers as exemplary citizens, they encourage listener acquiescence. If the ideal citizen is one who follows orders, even if it means the loss of life or limb, then questioning those orders places the war dissenter in a position of insubordination that disrespects the aesthetics of war and appears to give aid to the enemy. In short, presidents can use epideictic discourse during war to wrest away citizens' democratic agency.

While epideictic rhetoric in general offers potential benefits to presidential rhetors, the combination of epideictic and war is an especially potent brew. George W. Bush's address at North Island, with his invocation of collective memories of World War II, provides insight into one such case.

#### **The Context of Bush's Address on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory Over Japan**

**By the time of Bush's August 30, 2005, address, the Iraq war was not going well for a variety of reasons. In addition to the administration's obvious lack of preparation for occupying Iraq and its inability to quell what clearly had become a civil war, Bush found his rationale for the war discredited when no weapons of mass destruction were found. The 9/11 Commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that the White House's prewar intelligence lacked credibility, and the release of the Downing Street memo further attacked the administration's integrity when it revealed British intelligence's conclusion—**

eight months *before* the start of hostilities—that the United States had already decided to go to war in Iraq, regardless of the outcome of weapons inspections (Rich, 2006).

By August 2005, the United States had spent \$300 billion on the war and sacrificed the lives of more than 1850 military personnel, a number that did not account for the soldiers coming home disabled or the thousands of Iraqi civilians who had lost their lives (Page, 2005). The anti-war movement, which had lacked a credible spokesperson, also found one in August 2005 when Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a 24-year-old Army specialist who had lost his life in Iraq, held vigil in a chair under an umbrella alongside a ditch near the President’s vacation home in Crawford, Texas (“Cindy Sheehan’s Bus Tour,” 2005; Thrash, 2005). After Bush declared in early August that 14 Marines, killed in Iraq, had died “for a noble cause,” Sheehan had gone to Crawford to ask the President, “For what noble cause did my son die?” (cited in Thrash, 2005, p. A3). Over the course of Bush’s month-long vacation, thousands of anti-war protesters joined the grieved mother in her vigil, drawing nationwide media attention. The White House expressed sympathy for Sheehan’s loss, but the president refused to meet with her (Neal, 2005).

By the end of August, a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll showed Bush’s job approval rating was at its then lowest level ever of 45 percent, a decline largely attributable to increasing gas prices and the ongoing loss of life in Iraq (Morin & Balz, 2005). A *Newsweek* poll, during the same time period, revealed that 61 percent of Americans disapproved of how the president was handling Iraq (cited in Page, 2005). And soon, widespread criticisms of Bush’s domestic policies would further damage his political standing.

On August 28, a category 5 hurricane hurtled toward Louisiana and Mississippi as the president prepared to leave Texas for a friendly, invitation-only gathering in California on Medicare. In remarks to reporters, Bush (2005f) noted that federal agencies were standing by to help. On the afternoon of August 29, he reassured listeners in Rancho Cucamonga, California, that his administration was fully prepared to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina (Bush, 2005g), but earlier that morning, levees in New Orleans had already given way, rapidly filling the city with water (MacCash & O'Byrne, 2005). Nevertheless, the president remained in California, for he had already scheduled an event for the morning of August 30 that he did not want to miss: a planned commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V-J Day.

Bush's August 30 address at North Island was not an attempt to refute each of the many charges leveled against his Iraq war policy, and he did not yet appear to recognize the horror of the situation unfolding in New Orleans. Instead, his rhetoric exploited the rhetorical possibilities of a ceremonial occasion—the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory over Japan—through an epideictic response focused on invoking collective memories of World War II in order to bolster his leadership and deflect public criticism over the war, just as past wartime presidents had done during times of vehement public criticism. The timing of the Katrina debacle and the President's own decision to link his leadership in New Orleans with his leadership in Iraq during his address and in comments prior to it, however, would impede his persuasive efforts. Moreover, while the characteristics of Bush's epideictic rhetoric in service of the Iraq war offered him strategic benefits, they also contained points of vulnerability that his critics could exploit.

President Bush's Commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory Over Japan

**On this occasion, Bush appeared before an audience of service personnel and World War II veterans at the Naval Air Station on North Island at Coronado, near San Diego, California, an audience and setting that was particularly conducive to his message, given the station's role as a key U.S. base in World War II and Coronado's history as home to Rosie the Riveters and others working in aircraft factories, as well as its current residents of military personnel, veterans, and their families (Naval Air Station, 2007; San Diego, 2006). As the president spoke, he was surrounded by a sea of sailors in their dress whites and, near the stage, World War II veterans, many of whom were wearing caps and shirts that identified their regiments—all of which provided an aesthetic backdrop of war at its finest (Baker & White, 2005; Bee, 2005; Britton, 2005).**

Provided with a ceremonial rhetorical situation and a supportive audience, Bush praised veterans and current military personnel, a task that brings to mind Aristotle's observation, borrowed from Socrates, that "it is not difficult to praise Athenians to an Athenian audience" (1954, Book I, 9: 1367b, 5). The favorable dynamics of the circumstances, in addition to audience enthusiasm over hearing a president of the United States speak, virtually ensured a positive reception. Even if individuals in the audience did not agree with everything the president said, they were highly unlikely to interrupt, voice disapproval, or even refrain from applause. Such behavior during a ceremony would seem disrespectful not only to the speaker, but also to the veterans whom he honored. Moreover, Bush was the commander-in-chief for military personnel in the audience, so any obvious signs of disagreement would have raised questions of insubordination or, at the very least, raised the ire of their commanding officers. In his address, Bush made the most of the favorable epideictic occasion and collective memories of World War II to muster support for the war in Iraq. He offered praise for the greatest generation

and made links between it and the current generation; blamed and dehumanized enemies of the past and the present; advocated for war based on “lessons” of the past; and reinforced a shared identity to instill both obligation and confidence.

### **Praise for the Greatest Generation and Links to the Current Generation**

The president began his speech by attempting to fortify audience adherence to particular values that he attributed to the greatest generation and thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of his deliberative rhetoric that drew on those values. As Aristotle (1954) observed, “To praise a man is in one respect akin to urging a course of action . . . . Consequently, whenever you want to praise any one, think what you would urge people to do; and when you want to urge the doing of anything, think what you would praise a man for having done” (Book I, 9: 1367b, 35-1368a, 5). Bush would argue in the V-J Day speech that the United States must defeat terrorism, help its former enemy of Iraq establish a democratic government, maintain its resolve even in the face of setbacks, and make the necessary sacrifices in lives to accomplish the first three tasks, all in the name of defending freedom. To set up his arguments, the president first ascribed values supportive of these acts to World War II veterans and praised the veterans as models of virtue.

Bush began his speech with words of welcome for his audience, of sympathy for victims of Hurricane Katrina, and of praise for the service personnel in his audience. He stated, “As we deliver relief to our citizens to the south, our troops are defending all our citizens from threats abroad. In the war on terror, all of you gathered here today are playing a critical role” (Bush, 2005h).<sup>5</sup> Bush then moved to link current members of the armed forces with those of the past by offering his enkomion to the greatest generation. More specifically, the president said, “I’m *also* proud to stand with those whose achievements we commemorate today, the military veterans of World War II” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330, my emphasis). Throughout his praise for veterans, Bush

drew on collective memories of the war as a means of reinforcing the moral righteousness of U.S. military actions and of suggesting character attributes of World War II veterans that the current generation would do well to emulate. For example, he saluted veterans for successfully completing the mission of defeating fascist Germany and Japan. He said, “In war, America called you from your farms and your schools and your factories to defeat two of the most ruthless armies the world has known” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). Another major theme was praise for the greatest generation’s willingness to help its former enemies rebuild, which had “confirmed the power of freedom to transform the bitterest of enemies into the closest of friends” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). Bush’s enkomion also paid tribute to the determination of World War II veterans. Even when World War II was not going well for the United States, the president maintained that the greatest generation kept its faith in victory. “As we look into your faces, we see the same quiet resolve that defeated our enemies. And we count it a privilege to be the citizens of the country that you served” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). Finally, Bush praised World War II veterans for their sacrifice, treating them as wise elders who had risked everything to protect freedom for the United States and others around the world. He said, for instance, “Today, your hair is whitened. Your steps have slowed. Yet . . . the freedom that was born of your sacrifice has lifted millions of God’s children across the Earth. This freedom is your monument to your fallen friends, your gift to their children and grandchildren, and your sacred bond with generations of patriots past and present who have worn the nation’s uniform” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330).

Indeed, Bush consistently made links between the greatest generation of World War II and the younger generation of today, with the latter’s identity broadly described as “we” and “this generation” to encompass everyone from baby boomers to members of generation Y (Bush,

2005h; also see Bostdorff, 2003). In particular, the president referred to specific individuals to establish this relationship. His own father, former President George H. W. Bush, had been shot down during World War II and then had swum to safety, an event chronicled in newsreel footage that his 1988 presidential campaign used in campaign commercials. In George W. Bush's speech at North Island in 2005, he began by connecting himself with his father's well-known heroism when he thanked the audience "for making this son of a naval aviator feel right at home" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). The President's remark here helped the audience to overlook any questions that still persisted about his own military service during Vietnam (e.g., Ivins & Dubose, 2000) and instead to see him as the son of a World War II hero. Throughout his presentation, Bush referred to specific individuals who embodied such links between the greatest generation and the current generation. For example, the president announced, "Congressman Duncan Hunter is, today, here with his dad, Robert Hunter, who served in World War II. And he has a son who is a proud Marine in Iraq" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1331). Similarly, Bush (2005h) told the story of a sailor and a marine who were at Iwo Jima during World War II: "They didn't know each other, but they came together to fight for America's security." Eventually, the two men, Leon Stone and Jim Simpson, met when "Leon's son and Jim's daughter got married. And today, their grandson, Captain Randy Stone, carries on a proud family tradition. Captain Stone is a Marine officer now serving in Iraq. He knows that he and his generation are doing the same vital work in this war on terror that his grandparents did in World War II" (p. 1331). Through passages such as these, President Bush equated the heroism of World War II veterans with the heroism of military personnel in Iraq. His lines often prompted audience applause, for who among the listeners—especially in a military audience—would deny the courage of those who served during war? The President's rhetoric drew upon the love for sacrifice that is intertwined

with war to cast warriors—both old and new—as exemplars worthy of imitation, while also burnishing his own image by basking in the glow of the heroes that he praised. At the same time, Bush’s words functioned to equate the conflict of World War II with the conflict in Iraq, under the guise of paying tribute to particular individuals. Just as epideictic rhetoric may make clear connections between the present moment and other times (Aristotle, 1954), Bush’s rhetoric did the same.

### **Blame and Dehumanization of Enemies from the Past and Present**

While epideictic speeches most often involve praise, they also may include blame, for by attacking individuals who oppose revered values or who embody values antithetical to society, the ceremonial speaker provides understanding and encourages the sharing of community. Epideictic rhetoric on behalf of war may also dehumanize the enemy, which serves to justify military violence. Since the enemy is so evil, such rhetoric encourages a correspondingly positive self-image of the nation and its leader. President Bush’s message on the commemoration of V-J Day criticized both the enemies in the war on terror and the enemies of World War II; in fact, he argued that today’s war was the same as World War II because the enemies in both conflicts were the same.

Since the occasion of the President’s speech was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V-J Day, it may seem natural that he focused on World War II and its relevance to the current conflict. However, Bush compared the war on terror to World War II even in unlikely venues, such as his remarks at the dedication of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (Bush, 2005b). While he also associated his administration’s policy toward terrorism with the Truman Doctrine of the Cold War era (Bush, 2006a), the President’s overwhelmingly favorite analogy was undoubtedly World War II. This choice was a rhetorical one, for collective memories about World War II recall it as

a time when the United States and its allies were clearly on the side of good and their enemies on the side of evil. As most Americans remember it, World War II also ended with an unambiguous victory for our side and defeat for our enemies, an outcome that eluded the United States in Korea and Vietnam. Consistent with collective memories of World War II, then, the President's address on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V-J Day tended to emphasize the malicious nature of the opposing armies in World War II, but did not allude to any ambiguities of U.S. policy, such as the turning away of European Jews attempting to flee the Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bomb on civilians. Public memories are always partial in that they are, by necessity, incomplete and also encourage us to see the past from a particular vantage point (Vivian, 2004; Zelizer, 1995). Moreover, Bruner (2002) reminds us that public memories impact national identity in ways that may be used for political purposes. In Bush's address commemorating V-J Day, his depictions of World War II served to sanitize U.S. involvement in that conflict, to reinforce public memories of Americans as the unadulterated "good guys" of that war who opposed evil foes, and to offer the prism of World War II memories as the best way to understand U.S. involvement in Iraq.

Bush's equation of World War II with the war on terror was both explicit and implicit, but in both cases the enemy was an impersonal, relentless, vicious entity determined to defeat the United States. Early in his address, the president drew overt comparisons between the two when he said:

With Japan's surrender, the last of our enemies in World War II was defeated, and a World War that began for America in the Pacific came to an end in the Pacific. As we mark this anniversary, we are again a nation at war. Once again, war came to our shores with a surprise attack that killed thousands in cold blood. Once again, we face

determined enemies who follow a ruthless ideology that despises everything America stands for. Once again, America and our allies are waging a global campaign with forces deployed on virtually every continent. And once again, we will not rest until victory is America's and our freedom is secure. (Bush, 2005a, Aug. 30, p. 1331)

Just as the United States defeated the enemies of freedom in World War II, the president assured listeners it would do so again. Bush used language akin to that of Harry Truman in the Truman Doctrine speech to paint enemies in both eras as the followers of "totalitarian ideologies," a description broad enough to encompass Nazis, al Qaeda and Taliban fighters, and insurgents in Iraq (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333; Truman, 1947, p. 180). In addition to overt comparisons, the president employed subtle analogies that the audience had to complete in an enthymematic fashion. When Bush spoke of World War II's "kamikaze pilots on suicidal missions," for instance, he encouraged the audience to think of terrorists on suicide missions. When the president talked of fascist "commanders animated by a fanatical belief that their nation was ordained to rule," his words conjured up images of terrorist leaders even when he himself did not mention bin Laden by name (Bush, 2005h, p. 1332).

In his address, Bush also moved freely between descriptions of the current battles against the enemies in Afghanistan and in Iraq, thus strategically equating both with the war on terror. For example, the president praised his immediate audience for their "critical" contributions to "the war on terror" and then described specific tasks that military personnel were completing: "Our sailors on Navy ships are patrolling the high seas. You're maintaining those ships and keeping them ready for battle. You're serving on special operations teams that are hunting the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in the mountains of Afghanistan. And our Marine units are bringing the terrorists to justice in Iraq" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). By strategically placing

references to the specific enemies of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan next to the more ambiguous reference to terrorists in Iraq, the president depicted the enemies in both places as the same. Furthermore, he insisted that today's enemies in the war on terror were identical to those of World War II, for freedom was "once again opposed by fanatical adherence of a murderous ideology" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333). If the enemy was evil, then the United States—particularly as exemplified by its soldiers—must be good. While disturbing evidence had accrued to indicate that the war in Afghanistan against al Qaeda had nothing to do with the war in Iraq, Bush moved—in Platonic fashion—to ideal forms. Like Plato, he encouraged his audience to disregard sense data and, instead, to focus on the Truth that the evil in Afghanistan, Iraq, and World War II was the same and so must be opposed. Since this was the case, Bush claimed, the past could provide guidance for U.S. actions in the present.

### **Advocacy for War Based on "Lessons" from the Past**

Because of what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) referred to as "a lenient tendency" in epideictic discourse—or what I would describe as the favorable and deferential rhetorical situation of ceremonial rhetoric—epideictic orators readily turn to the strategy of amplification or the heightening of effect with little fear that the audience will protest. That is, "the speaker readily converts into universal values, if not eternal truths, that which has acquired a certain standing through social unanimity" (p. 51; also Aristotle, 1954; O'Gorman, 2005). This is particularly true for wartime epideictic discourse since the ceremonial rhetoric and aesthetics that accompany each war serve to reinforce particular principles, such as the value of freedom and the supremacy of American moral character. Presidents advocating war in their epideictic discourse not only assume the role of teacher, as all epideictic rhetors do, but also the role of traditionalist, for they attempt to strengthen the audience's predisposition to act by intensifying

its adherence to a particular set of societal values, values that—in the realm of foreign affairs—may be far more less likely to encounter resistance at the level of the individual citizen because of his or her relative lack of knowledge and experience. In other words, speakers do not attempt to persuade the audience that a value is important, but instead to increase audience adherence to that value relative to other values that listeners already hold (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). Presidents’ epideictic rhetoric on behalf of war is therefore important to their deliberative and forensic discourse—and that of their administrations—for it creates the value premises on which these other two forms of rhetoric rest (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Once speakers have established value warrants, they then may draw upon those warrants to urge a course of action (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1983; also see Toulmin, 1976). And if the president is the instructor in this rhetorical exchange, then citizens are the students who are far less likely to disrupt such a “lesson” in light of the exemplary citizen-soldiers and evil outside enemies who are also part of the president’s war tutorial.

In his commemoration of V-J Day, Bush assumed a conservative pedagogical role when he told his audience, “President Roosevelt was guided in victory in World War II by certain timeless principles” and then proceeded to explain them. For example, the president said, “Roosevelt believed that free nations could muster the resolve to defend themselves. In his day that belief was sorely tested by a ruthless and determined enemy . . . . This enemy took many lives and left many grieving families. Yet, in the end, they were no match for the forces of the United States and our allies” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1332). While there is no evidence that Roosevelt ever named determination as a core principle of his wartime leadership, Bush elevated the idea into a belief with which no one could disagree: free nations should summon the resolve to protect themselves against brutal enemies.

Indeed, the President's articulation and explanation of "timeless principles" drew upon collective memories in ways that swept aside any ambiguities, complexities, or countervailing evidence. Bush stated, for instance, "Roosevelt believed that free nations are peaceful nations that would not threaten America. He knew that it was the lack of democracy in Japan that allowed an unelected group of militarists to take control of the state, threaten our neighbors, attack America, and plunge an entire region into war." As a result, Bush concluded, Roosevelt recognized that the United States had to help Japan make the transition to democracy if the region were ever to have "peace and stability" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333). Mature democracies historically have not waged war against one another, and the President's words here reflected what has become a truism, that world democratization will lead to world peace. In *Electing to Fight*, however, Mansfield and Snyder (2005) provided convincing evidence that nations making the transition to democracy, but without strong political institutions that make leaders accountable to the public, are actually more prone to engage in war in the short run which may, in turn, impede progress toward democracy in the long run. Bush's epideictic discourse swept away such complexities of democratization, though, in favor of a simple and seemingly timeless principle: world peace will only come with democratization.

In a similar fashion, the president warned his pupils not to forget another principle or "lesson of this experience" from World War II: "The most powerful weapon in the arsenal of democracy is the spirit of liberty." He detailed how freedom had spread from Japan and Germany after World War II to Eastern Europe, Latin America, and other areas of the globe. According to Bush, this principle was still relevant, for "In Afghanistan and Iraq and Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, people have gone to the polls and chosen their leaders in free elections. Their example is inspiring millions across that region to claim their liberty, as well—

and they will have it” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333). What the President’s tribute to the principle of liberty overlooked, however, was the possibility that people may freely choose leaders whose policies the United States and its allies find reprehensible, as when Hamas won the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council just five months later (see Wilson, 2006). Not unexpectedly, Bush’s epideictic account also ignored those occasions where the United States had squashed the “spirit of liberty” to depose leaders in places like Iran, Guatemala, and Chile.

After detailing “timeless principles” of the past that should guide our actions in the present, the president examined the lessons that the United States itself had taught “the terrorists of our century” in the more recent past, but again he represented events selectively and strategically. Bush pointed to U.S. responses “after the hostage crisis in Iran, the bombings of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the first World Trade Center attack, the killing of American soldiers in Somalia, the destruction of two U.S. embassies in Africa, and the attack on the USS Cole.” From these events, Bush maintained, terrorists had concluded “that free societies lack the courage and character to defend themselves against a determined enemy” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333). He did not specifically name the past presidents responsible for responding to these events but, interestingly enough, his examples made Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and, especially, Bill Clinton culpable, yet let his own father off the hook altogether, despite criticisms that George H. W. Bush had refused to remove Saddam Hussein from power during the Persian Gulf war. Nonetheless, Bush argued that bin Laden and other “terrorists” had underestimated the United States, for they were “making the same mistake that the followers of other totalitarian ideologies made in the last century. They believe that democracies are inherently weak and corrupt and can be brought to their knees” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1333). In sum, the president **used the World War II commemoration as an opportunity to assume a pedagogical role and to**

**reinforce, in the face of public criticism over Iraq, a favorite argument of his: that weak or nonexistent military responses to terrorist attacks lead terrorists to believe that democratic countries can be intimidated. He accomplished this task by invoking the historic analogy of World War II and implying that early weak responses to Hitler led the fascists to underestimate the United States and other allies. Surely, Bush suggested, the Americans would not want to repeat that mistake.**

To reinforce this connection between the past and the present, Bush first established how the timeless principles that he recited already had become the basis for current deliberative action. He stated, “After September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, we’ve taught the terrorists a very different lesson. America will not run in defeat, and we will not forget our responsibilities. We have brought down two murderous regimes. We’re driving terrorists from their sanctuaries. We’re putting the terrorists on the run all across the world” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334). In short, just as the Nazis learned that the United States and its allies would, in fact, defend themselves, terrorists today had discovered the same. Bush’s words here also functioned, once again, to equate the Taliban in Afghanistan with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, since both were “murderous regimes” defeated in the war on terror.

What was clearly most important for the President, however, was that Americans stay the course. Despite U.S. successes in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush warned, “The terrorists and insurgents are now waging a brutal campaign of terror in Iraq.” In addition to killing and intimidating Iraqis, the enemy was “trying to break the will of the American people. Their goal is to turn Iraq into a failed state like Afghanistan was under the Taliban.” If the terrorists were successful, they would use Iraq as a locale to train future terrorists and Iraq’s oil fields as a means to finance their efforts (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334).

After forecasting this dangerous scenario, the president drew upon the timeless principles that he had reinforced in his epideictic rhetoric; more specifically, he employed the principles as premises that grounded the deliberative action for which he called. Bush emphasized:

Our goal is clear, as well. We will defeat the terrorists. We'll build a free Iraq that will fight terrorists instead of giving them aid and sanctuary. A free Iraq will offer people throughout the Middle East a hopeful alternative to the hateful ideology being peddled by the terrorists. A free Iraq will show that when America gives its word, America keeps its word.

That choice—this is the choice we face: Do we return to the pre-September the 11<sup>th</sup> mind-set of isolation and retreat, or do we continue to take the fight to the enemy and support our allies in the broader Middle East? I've made my decision: We will stay on the offensive. We will stand with the people of Iraq, and we will prevail (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334).

Acceptance of the President's conclusions here rested upon the principles that he reinforced earlier in his speech, for his epideictic lesson about military responses to violent attacks, in tandem with both his equation of the current situation with World War II and American culture's romantic collective memories about that war, made it easier for him to guide listeners—especially his positively predisposed audience at North Island—to think of a military response to terrorism as the *only* reasonable response. In this fashion, Hahn's (1987) observation about the presidential tendency to rely upon epideictic rhetoric in general seems particularly appropriate to ceremonial discourse about war wherein presidents habitually send troops into harm's way without a formal declaration from Congress (Bostdorff, 1994; Fisher, 1995). The President's anniversary address did not, in Hahn's words, lay "information before us, asking us

to deliberate on what the policy should be. Rather, the policy is presented as a *fait accompli* and we are asked to support it because it conforms with our values” (Hahn, 1987, p. 260). Bush’s use of a leading rhetorical question with its false dichotomy—were there really only two choices?—followed by “I’ve made my decision,” underscored his role as commander-in-chief and depicted him as a leader by situating him correctly in regard to communal principles. When Bush then immediately moved to the ambiguous “we” to describe what “we” would do on the basis of his judgment, the president implicitly positioned Americans as supporting his decision and carrying out his policies, much like trained soldiers following orders.

### **Reinforcement of a Shared Identity to Instill Both Obligation and Confidence**

Throughout his speech, but particularly near its conclusion, President Bush fortified the links between the greatest generation and the current generation in order to reinforce a shared identity and, thereby, to instill a sense of obligation in which the only way that Americans could respect their heroic elders was by supporting the war in Iraq. The president hinted at such persuasive ends early in his address when he told World War II veterans in the crowd, “We pray that your comrades you have lost found peace with their Creator, and we honor your sacrifice by recommitting ourselves to the great ideals for which you fought and bled” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330). Like so many presidents before him, Bush interwove the ideas of blood sacrifice and recommitment (Bostdorff, 1994; Ivie, 1980, 2007a, 2007b; Noon, 2004). His words of praise, after all, were not for the greatest generation as a whole, but for the men who fought and especially those who fought and died.

In his analysis of what he calls the “dying formula,” Gibson (2004) traced the appearance of “the expression ‘X died/gave himself for Y’—and/or the propounding and explication of the theme embodied within it” through a wide range of ancient messages, including Homer’s *Illiad*,

Isocrates' speeches, and Eurpides' tragedies. Most often, rhetors depicted soldiers or statesmen giving their lives for their polis or their nation as the noblest and most holy type of sacrifice that one can make (pp. 20-21, 24). Particularly appropriate to our analysis here, Gibson found that this rhetorical appeal appeared most often in what we might describe as epideictic settings—civic celebrations, eulogies, battlefield speeches, inscriptions on monuments that commemorate soldiers who died in battle, etc.—and argued that sacrifice had brought or would bring the defeat of the enemy who had killed the deceased. In short, the epideictic praise of military sacrifice to advocate for war has a long and prolific history.

Not surprisingly, then, Bush also focused on the soldiers of World War II. Although he referred on a number of occasions to the “men and women who served in World War II,” the past world that the president described was a largely masculine, military one. The individuals that he honored, both from the greatest generation and from current service personnel, were male, not female. In the aggregate, Bush spoke of the “dads and granddads who have similar stories about their World War II service. They're the modest sons of a peaceful country” (Bush, 2005h, p. 1331). Women in his commemoration of V-J Day were wives and mothers of heroes and dignitaries, and their roles were to propagate new soldiers (e.g., Jim Simpson's daughter gave birth to a son who now serves in Iraq) and, along with all Americans, to feel pride in their loved ones' military service and to mourn the loss of American lives (Bush, 2005h). Akin to the way that ancient Athens limited the role of women in state military funerals (Loraux, 1986), President Bush downplayed women, as well. There was no talk of Rosie the Riveter here. At North Island, Bush did not mention sacrifice on the home front in the form of rationing or conserving because the nation's consumption-based economy demanded other activities on the part of citizens if it were to remain robust. Rather, he strategically employed collective memories

of World War II, which were, in themselves, selective remembrances. Although Bush's focus on World War II veterans and their sacrifice may seem natural given the setting, his epideictic rhetoric about Iraq typically exhibited this emphasis, reflecting what Slotkin (1973) once referred to as American culture's fascination with regenerating itself through violence.

Indeed, the president insisted that Americans must be willing to endure more bloodshed in order to honor both soldiers who had died in the war on terror and soldiers killed during World War II. Near the close of his speech, Bush said of Iraq, "In this war, some of our best citizens have made the ultimate sacrifice. We mourn the loss of every life. . . . And we will honor their sacrifice by completing the mission and laying the foundation for peace" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334). Immediately after this declaration and the applause it prompted, the president intoned: "Sixty years ago, American forces made the same type of sacrifice and helped liberate two continents, and made our world a more peaceful place. . . . With each passing day their ranks thin, but the peace they built endures. And we will never let the new enemies of a new century destroy with cowardice what these Americans built with courage" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334). To refuse to support the war in Iraq, a conflict that Bush had consistently depicted as part of the larger war on terror, was not only to disrespect the individuals who had given their lives to that cause, but to show contempt for the veterans who risked and sacrificed all in World War II. No one wants to think that a soldier has died in vain, so the notion of "honoring the sacrifice" can, in the short term at least, provide a compelling reason to continue a war. By paying epideictic tribute to soldiers and their sacrifice, the president also could deter critics of his war policy from speaking by making it appear that anyone who attacked his policy was not supporting the troops or the values that they represented.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Bush's praise for World War II veterans'

contributions and the enormity of their losses made the sacrifices suffered in Iraq—sacrifices borne by a relatively small number of Americans—appear minute by comparison.

The President's argument created a sense of obligation, but it also instilled confidence about the chances of fulfilling that obligation successfully. Throughout his address, Bush emphasized how the United States was destined to win the war on terrorism because it had already defeated opponents of freedom during World War II. He told listeners, "In the midst of this struggle, we have confidence in our cause because we know that America has faced down brutal enemies before" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1331). The President's words here, as in much of his post-9/11 rhetoric, reflected the theme of predestination so prevalent in Puritan discourse; predestination helped the Puritans sustain their tenacity in the face of crisis by assuring them of ultimate victory (see Bormann, 1985; Bostdorff, 1994). In Bush's messages about the war on Iraq and the war on terror, the theme of predestination performed the same function. To encourage his audience further, the president held up the greatest generation as an example: "The men and women who served in World War II belonged to a generation that kept its faith even when liberty's ultimate triumph was far from clear" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1331). Because they kept faith and succeeded, listeners could infer, Americans today could do the same. The president concluded his North Island speech by telling service personnel that they were "every bit as selfless and dedicated to liberty as the generations that came before." Moreover, "It is the spirit of liberty that keeps you strong, and it is *the history* that gives us confidence to know that in the vital work of spreading liberty, America, and those of us who love freedom will prevail" (Bush, 2005h, p. 1334, my emphasis). By reinforcing a shared identity between the greatest generation and younger Americans, Bush's epideictic rhetoric attempted to create a sense of

obligation about supporting the Iraq war, as well confidence in the possibility of winning the war under his leadership.

### **Reflections on Epideictic Rhetoric and War**

**Bush’s commemoration of the Victory over Japan demonstrates quite clearly both the strategic advantages that epideictic rhetoric offers wartime presidents, as well as its points of vulnerability that war dissenters might utilize.**

The immediate audience for the President’s address—active-duty military personnel and veterans—responded positively, for his epideictic discourse clearly defined the importance of Iraq by linking the war there with a heroic past and joined military personnel with him in the mission that he described. Throughout the speech, audience members regularly gave Bush loud rounds of applause, particularly when he praised them and firmly declared his “decision” to remain on the offensive in the war. Media accounts also indicated that his North Island audience approved of Bush’s message. For example, Robb Mann, a young sailor from Washington, observed, “Having the president here, really personalizes it. It reaffirms to me why we wear this uniform” (cited in Kucher & Farr-Baker, 2005). Similarly, a sailor from Maryland, Tiffany Ortiz, said the speech gave her goose bumps: “It is so reassuring to know that the president is behind us and that we are fighting for a cause. I’ve never felt so honored to serve as I do now” (cited in Kucher & Farr-Baker, 2005). David Gonzales, a 21-year-old sailor, exclaimed after the speech, “If I had the chance, I’d go over there [to Iraq] tomorrow” (cited in Keefe, 2005a, p. A3). Although a few sailors and veterans were somewhat circumspect about whether the World War II analogy fit (see Bee, 2005; Marelius, 2005; Sterngold, 2005), media accounts indicated that they still largely expressed their approval of the President’s address. Navy veteran Lawrence Strickland, who had been a POW when he served on the *USS Pueblo*, declared, “We will follow

this president through hell. He says what he means and follows through” (cited in Kucher & Baker, 2005). Likewise, World War II veteran Ralph Kling praised Bush’s message: “He needs to say that more often and louder . . . He’s our cheerleader” (cited in Marelius, 2005, p. A1). In print accounts, only one veteran—Helen Rosen, who had served as an administrative aide for the Marines during World War II—voiced disapproval for the President’s conduct of the Iraq war, saying “I think we pretty well ought to get our troops out as soon as we can. And I feel sorry for those who have been over there twice and then a third time” (cited in Marelius, 2005, p. A1). This dissenting voice notwithstanding, Bush’s speech appeared to prompt positive judgments of his leadership from an audience crucial to his war effort.

Had Hurricane Katrina not pushed the North Island speech out of the spotlight, it seems quite likely that the president also would have benefited from news coverage that included the romantic, aesthetic visuals of war, which supported his rhetoric linking World War II and Iraq. The White House had taken care to ensure a positive, photogenic backdrop, and viewers who watched the speech or clips of the speech on television could see the enthusiastic response of the crowd—including the sailors in their dress whites and the World War II veterans in their identifying caps and shirts—potentially prompting the question: “If our troops support the President, then why shouldn’t I?” In a similar fashion, print media included photos of naval personnel listening attentively and of Bush shaking hands with sailors and veterans, captioned with quotations from the speech that compared Iraq and World War II (e.g., see photos and captions in Keefe, 2005b; “Lessons of the Past,” 2005, p. A5; Marelius, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Although epideictic war rhetoric does, in many ways, stack the deck in favor of the president, the case of Bush at North Island also suggests its points of vulnerability that war dissenters may exploit. First, opponents might argue that the president’s leadership fails to

uphold the values and principles that he praises. For example, war critics raised questions about why Bush, who praised the sacrifice of soldiers, had taken a month-long vacation in the midst of the war and refused to meet with a grieving mother. The comparative sacrifice seemed incommensurate. As one website petition demanded, “Either the Bush Kids Put Their Lives on the Line for George’s ‘Noble War’ or the Troops Come Home” (cited in Neal, 2005). The president had further opened himself to criticism in his messages immediately prior to leaving for California, in his remarks at the Medicare gathering the next day, and in his address at North Island by pairing assurances about his administration’s preparation for Hurricane Katrina with words of praise for progress in Iraq or for service personnel. **On August 28, for example, Bush (2005f) told reporters that he had signed disaster declarations in advance so that federal agencies could “coordinate all disaster relief efforts with State and local officials,” and he urged citizens in Katrina’s path to seek safety. For far more of his presentation, though, the president emphasized how Iraqi political leaders that day had “completed the process for drafting a permanent constitution” (pp. 1310-1311). In California on August 29, Bush declared, “For those of you who are concerned about whether or not we’re prepared to help [in the aftermath of Katrina], don’t be. We are. . . . [O]nce we’re able to assess the damage, we’ll be able to move in and help those good folks in the affected areas.” He then noted, after offering this reassurance, that the United States was also “making progress overseas” as success with the Iraqi constitution indicated (Bush, 2005g, pp. 1321-1322). At the start of his address at North Island, the president again juxtaposed Katrina and Iraq when he voiced sympathy for the hurricane victims and praise for the military personnel in his audience. Bush also, as noted earlier, paralleled the disaster relief being sent to the Gulf with how “our troops are defending all our citizens from threats abroad” in the war on**

terror (Bush, 2005h, p. 1330. When the White House's inept flood control and recovery efforts became clear, critics used the opportunity to criticize Bush's leadership by pointing to the deleterious impact of the Iraq war on domestic policy and homeland security. Nation of Islam's Minister Louis Farrakhan remarked, for instance, "Isn't it interesting: They couldn't find \$12 to \$14 billion for that [flood control measures in New Orleans], but paid \$340 billion for a war in Iraq" (cited in Vegh, 2005, p. B1). Likewise, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (2005, p. D10) caustically observed, "Now, thanks to Mr. Bush's variously incompetent, diffident and hubristic mismanagement of the attack by Katrina, he has sent the entire world a simple and unambiguous message: whatever the explanation, the United States is unable to fight its current war and protect homeland security at the same time."

A second potential strategy is that war opponents might discount how the president has applied an analogy deriving from collective memory, but in a way that does not question the collective memory itself. Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean, for instance, responded to Bush's speech by observing, "Democratic Presidents Roosevelt and Truman led America to victory in World War II because they laid out a clear plan for success to the American people, American allies and America's troops. President Bush has failed to put together a plan, so despite the bravery and sacrifice of our troops, we are not making the progress that we should be in Iraq" (cited in Baker & White, 2005, p. A7). Similarly, John Francis Peters, an antiwar protester outside the Navy Medical Center, told a reporter that he would have been glad to serve in World War II, but Iraq "is not the same . . . . It's an invasion on our part" (cited in Marelius, 2005, p. A1). By treating World War II as a justified war, Dean and Peters did not question collective memories and risk the ire such questioning would bring, but instead focused

their attentions on how the president had misapplied the analogy; they thereby avoided potentially complicating their persuasive task.

A third way that war dissenters might oppose a president's epideictic discourse is by using a competing historic analogy in order to make their argument. Some opponents, for example, responded to Bush's speech by saying that the war in Iraq was more akin to Vietnam than World War II (e.g., "Leave Iraq to the Iraqis," 2005), but that comparison was, in itself, one that drew on contentious public memories. A better choice would have been the employment of an alternative analogy from the collective memories on which the president drew or from other commonly-accepted collective memories. While not intended as criticism of the President's policies, comments made by Republican Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour—a staunch Bush loyalist—and New Orleans tourist Denise Bollinger demonstrate the potential of such an approach. Barber, for instance, appropriated World War II imagery when he said parts of his state hit by the hurricane looked like "Hiroshima," a phrase that recalled the destructive U.S. attack on a Japanese city during World War II (cited in Treaster & Kleinfeld, 2005, p. A1). Similarly, Bollinger linked New Orleans with war—this time, Iraq—for a reporter when she described the looting taking place as "downtown Baghdad," an allusion that conjured up the Bush administration's lack of preparation for the civil unrest that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein ("New Orleans Sinks," 2005, p. A6). Through such public statements, individuals suggested that the destruction in New Orleans was like World War II's first atomic blast and the White House response to the crisis akin to its inept management of the chaos in Baghdad. Barbour and Bollinger did not intend their analogies to serve as critiques of the President's policies in New Orleans and in Iraq, but one can imagine war critics making use of such analogies for exactly that purpose. Indeed, Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich told reporters

that the Gulf Coast had been obliterated by indifference, which he called—harkening back to Bush’s initial rationale for the war—“a weapon of mass destruction” (Eaton, 2005, p. A10).

These potential vulnerabilities notwithstanding, war dissenters will find it difficult to counter the epideictic appeals of the commander-in-chief, given the characteristics of this rhetoric, the cultural precedents that the repetitive ritual of epideictic war rhetoric has set, and the authority of the presidential office itself.<sup>8</sup> In Bush’s case, the administration’s devastatingly clear failure with Katrina hurt the President’s credibility with the public and also gave war opponents an opening that facilitated their critique. A *Newsweek* poll conducted the week after Katrina found that Bush’s approval rating had gone even lower with only 38 percent of Americans approving of his job performance (cited in “Drive-by Presidency,” 2005, p. A8). Nevertheless, President Bush continued to rely upon epideictic rhetoric to argue for his leadership on Iraq, an approach that still prompted highly enthusiastic responses with his most supportive audiences, as at the commencement exercises at the Coast Guard Academy in May 2007 or at the Air Force Academy in May 2008.<sup>9</sup> The President’s employment of World War II to advocate for continued war in Iraq may have lost its appeal to many citizens as the death toll mounted, the original rationales of the war were called into question, and domestic issues, as epitomized in New Orleans, took a downward spiral. Yet, it is also the case that Bush used epideictic rhetoric to great effect in gaining acquiescence to his initial acts of war against Iraq and in maintaining vast public support for a long while. When he began to run into more serious opposition in the summer of 2005, the president turned to epideictic discourse to rally the faithful before audiences like the Idaho National Guard in Nampa, Idaho, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention in Salt Lake City (Bush, 2005e, 2005d), and he continued to do so long after Katrina.

The perpetual reliance upon epideictic discourse to advocate for war has serious societal consequences. First, epideictic rhetoric's exploitation of the ceremonial aesthetics of war perpetuates our nation's war culture by embellishing war's beauty and ennobling war itself. Former war correspondent, Chris Hedges, observed, "The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. . . . And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble" (2003, p. 3). Through epideictic rhetoric and collective memory, presidents sound the trumpet of patriotism to lead the nation to war and, through epideictic rhetoric and collective memory, presidents deflect criticism and continue to promote war once it is underway. Epideictic war rhetoric also holds out military service and sacrifice as the ultimate acts of citizenship. Whether they are teachers, farmers, or Peace Corps volunteers, all other citizens wither into insignificance in wartime epideictic discourse. Soldiers, on the other hand, become larger than life in such rhetoric, with their individual stories and lives largely unmentioned in deference to their heroic sacrifice on behalf of the nation. As Loraux (1986) noted of Athenian funeral orations, the state appropriates soldiers, replacing "man with the citizen" in death, and thereby demonstrating that "all valor, all worth" is concentrated in the *polis* (pp. 337, 335). Each war, with its rituals and its epideictic discourse, serves to continue the American culture of war and the power of the individual who leads that culture: the commander-in-chief.

Furthermore, the epideictic presidential rhetor's portrayal of the polis as superior to others may drive a wedge between a nation and its allies. Mackin found that no less an epideictic orator than Pericles himself fell victim to such self-inflicted wounds. In his famous funeral oration, Pericles engaged in schismogenesis, wherein he united Athenians by depicting them as

far superior to the other Greek city-states on which they relied. Pericles' rhetorical approach was successful in the short term, but over the long run Athens declined because it failed to recognize the degree to which it was reliant on other members of the larger Greek system. In Mackin's words, "Athens could only force others to obey its will so long as its power prevailed" (1991, p. 258). Bush's paeans to Americans as fulfilling a special role in the world likewise functioned to push away U.S. allies and overlooked the degree to which we must cooperate with other governments in dealing with terrorism and many other issues.

This sense of moral superiority also arises from wartime epideictic's blaming and dehumanizing of enemies, which makes it easier for Americans to justify acts of violence to defend "freedom" and to be intolerant of those who dissent. Indeed, the ceremonial characteristics of wartime epideictic—along with its constitution of the audience as deferential students and its portrayal of soldiers who follow orders as exemplary citizens—actively discourage dissent. As Ivie (2003) observed, however, "a call to kill for democracy, or in the name of democracy, or to defend and extend democracy is a cloaked inducement to slay the soul of democracy. . . . it is tragically ironic to conjure up a rhetorical spell against democracy's evil enemies as an excuse for abating, abandoning, or indefinitely suspending the actual practice of democracy" (p. 182; also Ivie, 2007a). Dissent and debate are integral features of healthy democracy that the epideictic advocacy of war serves to silence.

Although epideictic war rhetoric generally and Bush's Iraq discourse specifically raise serious concerns, the epideictic is not inherently bad, but an important and often useful form of public discourse, as Vivian (2009) pointed out in his study of its politically destructive *and* constructive uses in intrastate conflicts. Ceremonial rhetoric helps us to understand events, to recommit ourselves as a community, to judge the eloquence and potential leadership of speakers,

and to pave the way for future action consistent with our values. While we should listen to such rhetoric with a healthy skepticism, Adams (2006) reminds us that the cynical inability to trust any form of public epideictic “may actually *disable* one from enacting one’s solidarity—from *being* in solidarity—with any given community” (p. 89, his emphasis). Ivie (2007b) also offers the possibility that humans may be able to use commemorative rhetoric as “strategic rites of humanization and cultural resources for reconciliation” (p. 241).<sup>10</sup> The benefits and promise of epideictic rhetoric notwithstanding, however, the case of Bush and Iraq underscores the need to pay close attention to this rhetorical form, particularly when it advocates for war.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Following a different vein, Vivian (2006) examined what he called “neoliberal epideictic” in the form of declamations of “canonical texts” by New York Governor George Pataki, New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, followed by George W. Bush’s public eulogy, that took place before the Iraq war to commemorate the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks. Vivian noted that neoliberal epideictic is “highly conducive to corporate media dissemination” and “extols the pursuits of private life, both social and economic, as ideal standards of citizenship” by avoiding any focus on deliberative consequences (pp. 4, 20).

<sup>2</sup> See: Bush, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004c, 2005a, 2005j, 2006b, 2006c; 2007a, 2007b, 2008b.

<sup>3</sup> See Bush, 2004a; Bush, 2004b, 2004d, 2005b, 2005c, 2005h, 2006d, 2008a.

<sup>4</sup> This helps to explain, in large measure, Lincoln’s high degree of restraint in depicting Confederate foes; his ultimate goal, after all, was the restoration of the Union.

<sup>5</sup> My analysis throughout this essay is also based on a video recording of the President’s speech, Bush (2005i, Aug. 30).

<sup>6</sup> For more on how Reagan and George H. W. Bush used rhetoric to associate themselves with members of the armed forces who had been wounded or killed and thereby to deflect criticism, see Bostdorff, 1994; Jamieson, 1988; Ritter & Henry, 1992. George W. Bush also consistently employed epideictic tributes to soldiers and their sacrifice to encourage national unity. See, e.g., Bumiller, 2005, Aug. 23.

<sup>7</sup> The one exception to the White House’s careful attention to visual detail also ended up serving the rhetorical needs of those who criticized the President’s handling of Katrina. In the days that followed, critics began circulating a photo of a smiling Bush strumming the guitar that country

singer Mark Wills had given him backstage after the North Island speech, juxtaposed with photos of weeping citizens at the Superdome (e.g., “A Tale of Two Photos,” 2005; “Who says Bush,” 2005).

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of rhetorical obstacles faced by two congressional war opponents, Sam Nunn and Robert Kennedy, see Murphy, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Asked to comment briefly on the President’s commencement speech at the Coast Guard Academy for Connecticut’s National Public Radio station in 2007, I listened over the phone to the station’s broadcast of his entire performance, which garnered loud applause and praise from his immediate audience. A political scientist, asked on-air about a dimension of President Bush’s policies, expressed surprise at the listeners’ responses, commenting that they must be hearing an entirely different speech.

<sup>10</sup> My experiences with Eyes Wide Open, a project of the American Friends Service Committee, suggests one example. Eyes Wide Open uses epideictic rhetoric—verbal in its closing ceremony and visual in the form of empty combat boots, each paired with the name of a fallen U.S. soldier, along with empty civilian shoes and slippers and photos of ordinary Iraqi people as a way to humanize and individualize the impact of war. See <http://afsc.org/campaign/eyes-wide-open>.