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## Stunning victory in propaganda war

### Bush uses media expertly to push apocalyptic view U.S. president

#### becomes unlikely master of rhetoric

[OLIVIA WARD](#)  
FEATURE WRITER

In the ruins of the two towers, at the western wall of the Pentagon, on a field in Pennsylvania, this nation made a pledge, declared U.S. President George W. Bush.

"Whatever the duration of this struggle and whatever the difficulties, we will not permit the triumph of violence in the affairs of men. Free people will set the course of history."

Last January, when Bush made his now-contentious State of the Union address, he was winding up Americans for a new war on Iraq, sending troops into battle against a country that had not attacked theirs, and was neither attacking its neighbours nor waging civil war.

But Bush's rhetoric was so successful that by the time the war began in mid-March, most Americans were convinced that Saddam Hussein was behind the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and that he had weapons of mass destruction poised to finish the job of destroying the United States.

For a man who once told reporters that "anybody who doesn't think I'm smart enough to handle the job is misestimating," this was an extraordinary achievement.

In less than a year, Bush's popularity had zoomed from a scant 50 per cent — following an election that many believed was rigged — to 82 per cent after the Al Qaeda assault, one of the highest presidential job ratings in American history.

Bush's progress from bungler to emperor was made possible by the unprecedented attacks on the U.S. But it was speeded to its conclusion with the coaching of a well co-ordinated cadre of advisers who taught the president one of the most crucial lessons of politics, that language is power.

"Before Sept. 11, people talked about `Bushisms,' meaning humorous misstatements," says linguistics expert Dr. Sandra Silberstein of the University of

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Washington. "Now that's been turned around to mean folksy delivery that's endearing and to the point."

When Bush mounts the podium these days, few Americans, including his political foes, are laughing anymore. And as a new election looms in November, 2004, the strongest voice in the country continues to be the president's.

That, says psychologist Dr. Renana Brooks, is because the once-shaky leader has been able to "use his language intentionally to dominate others. He's a master of emotional language."

Brooks, who heads the Washington-based Sommet Institute for the Study of Power and Persuasion, is completing a book called *The Virtue Myth: American Culture's Obsession with Abuse and Intimidation*. She says the kind of power language that Bush employs is all about fear and control. "He's gone farther than any other president in creating a crisis scenario that makes people feel helpless."

Using language as a marketing tool, Bush has turned fear into propaganda. It's a winning formula that allowed him to mesmerize the nation after Sept. 11, making himself politically invulnerable, while turning his political enemies into enemies of the state.

"Our enemies send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder," Bush told the nation four months after the Al Qaeda attacks. "They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and creed."

On the surface, Bush was describing the terrorists who killed some 3,000 people in the United States. But, he continued, "we stand for a different choice — made long ago on the day of our founding. We affirm it again today. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life."

Soon there would be no doubt that "we" meant a nation of right-thinking citizens solidly behind Bush. To be otherwise was to be a traitor to America. The polarization of the country — and the world — into "us" and "them," began with the terrorist attacks, but quickly spread to political debate.

Few critics dared to raise their voices in the wake of Sept. 11. And as months went by, those who did were pilloried as un-American. Ignored or derided by the media, they were effectively silenced.

Bush's techniques for winning public support have been stunningly successful. And, says Brooks, they employ several "dominating linguistic techniques" that prompt surrender to his will. "The first is empty language," she says. "It's like empty calories — you just enjoy the flavour and don't ask questions about the content. Bush talks in generalizations that may be faulty, but are difficult to oppose."

Another Bush technique, she says, is "personalization," or focusing on himself as the main actor, with the public as a passive and dependent audience: "I will not yield. I will not rest. I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people," he said in his State of the Union speech.

And, says Brooks, Bush uses what psychologists call "learned helplessness" to convince Americans they have no control over their environment.

"He uses very negative, pessimistic language," she says. "It stresses an ongoing

threat to the personal survival of Americans. The war on terror, for instance, will be 'a lengthy campaign unlike any we have ever seen.' There is no positive message there."

When analyzing Bush's speeches, Brooks found that the ratio of negative to positive statements was much higher, and the pessimistic statements more persistent than those of any other president.

The language Bush uses is often biblical, and apocalyptic. It borrows material from the Christian right wing, which polls show makes up a third of the American electorate.

Although many Americans downplay Christian fundamentalism as simple-minded and provincial, analysts say it has gone through a dramatic transformation since the early 1980s, emerging as one of the country's most powerful and sophisticated political forces.

Bush has made direct appeals to the Christian right, and appears to identify with its values.

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**'Bush uses his language intentionally to dominate others.'**

***Dr. Renana Brooks, Sommet Institute for the Study of Power and Persuasion***

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"One hears that Bush, who entered the White House without a clear sense of what he wanted to do there, now feels there was a purpose behind his election all along," said right-wing commentator Norman Podhoretz.

"A born-again Christian, it is said he believes he was chosen by God to eradicate the evil of terrorism from the world."

Silberstein, whose book *War of Words* investigates the strategic use of political language after Sept. 11, says that Bush's message could never have had such massive impact without the backing of the media. "The tools available to him were unprecedented," she said.

"With Sept. 11, the (television) headlines were fairly terrifying, but random. The constant repetition of horrifying images, with voiced-over narrative, created a terrifying world that viewers were shown over and over.

"With Iraq, there were headlines telling people what to think. Instead of commentary, or thoughtful conversation, you got visual images that worked like entertainment, reinforcing the message that Bush wanted to promote."

For the Bush administration, the supreme media moment came when the president chose to announce the end of the Iraq war by making a symbolic landing on the deck of a naval carrier, wearing a jaunty military-style uniform and surrounded by wildly cheering sailors.

"The tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free," he declared.

A handful of critics who objected that Saddam Hussein had not been captured and the shooting continued, were quickly shouted down.

As Bush capitalized on media images of patriotism, the flag-waving campaign his administration was publicizing went farther, into the commercial sector.

"While the administration was selling patriotism, commercial interests were using patriotism to sell products," says Silberstein.

"Instead of planting a victory garden, you had to go out and buy a car."

Bush and other administration members continue to claim victory in Iraq and defend their misleading statements as the fault of other people.

But rhetoric and reality may now be on a collision course, as politicians who previously kept silent are demanding answers and accusations of lying are growing louder.

Says Silberstein: "Bush is vulnerable, and we're likely to see a real backlash."

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