

What Account of the 'nation' and 'nationalism' is put forward in the Speeches of George W. Bush

Written by Katie Smith

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KATIE SMITH, DEC 22 2007

Nationalism is often used in times of war; it calls people to serve a higher cause and legitimises mass human sacrifice in the name of the state. In this essay I will examine the changes in the nationalism of President George W. Bush over the period of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I will argue that President Bush has changed his nationalist rhetoric in order to prepare the American people for war. Like presidents before him, Bush subscribes to a civic nationalism based not in race but in the liberal principles of freedom, equality and justice. His nationalist rhetoric, both before and after 9/11 focuses purely on shared values, attitudes and experiences and so is theoretically very inclusive. There are many changes that occur after 9/11; the compassion of the American people is replaced as the dominant theme by their bravery and willingness to sacrifice for the greater, national or global, good; virtues of the American state are more heavily stressed; and the proportion of speeches given to nationalist rhetoric is greatly increased.

I will examine Bush's nationalism thematically. First I will give a general overview of traditional nationalist rhetoric, Bush's view of the nation, and the social and political context in which Bush operates. Secondly I will look in detail at the purported characteristics of the American people; their work ethic and imagination, their compassion, and their bravery and self sacrifice. I will examine the changing role of each and the ways in which Americans are encouraged to take up these virtues. Finally, I will discuss the portrayal of the American nation as a whole; in particular its values and its position in the world. This gives an indication of Bush's aspirations for America and his view of its place in history.

Nationalism in America

Nationalism is a discourse defining a certain group of people as a nation and constructing for them a shared identity

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and sense of belonging. It is tied up with the idea of statehood as something to be achieved or maintained and has been at the heart of much of the violence of the twentieth century. Few people escape exposure to nationalist ideas and for most, reinforcement of their national identity is an inescapable aspect of daily life. (Billig, 2005) One of the most influential and common classifications of nationalism separates so called 'civic nationalism,' nationalism based on shared political principles and values, from 'ethnic nationalism,' based upon shared heritage, language and traditions. (Smith, 2005) American nationalism is commonly held up as an ideal type of the former; the mixed ethnicities of its founders combined with a wish to be separate from Britain (the ethnic home of most settlers) meant that the issue of ethnicity was not a suitable base for the new nation. Instead, for centuries a commitment to liberal principles has been at the core of Americanism. (Citrin et al., 1994: 6)

President Bush's view is no different; he stresses America's role as a beacon of freedom and equality to people everywhere (05/08/2006) and takes pride in America's ethnic diversity, even claiming it is as a reason for its military success. (14/07/2001) While ethnicity is portrayed as irrelevant, subscription to 'American values' is essential; 'We are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests and teach us what it means to be citizens.' (Bush, 20/01/2001) While there are many people excluded from the nation, the criteria for being 'in' or 'out' is never mentioned thus preventing the principle coming into conflict with immigration policy. (Bush, 17/02/2006) Inclusivity is important throughout Bush's speeches; he is very clear on the issue of gender and avoids the common trap of equating citizens with men (Grant, 1991); "moms and dads" and "service men and women" appear throughout. To a lesser extent this is also true for religion. Churches are never mentioned without mentioning mosques and synagogues and "gratitude to God" is held up as a commonality between the major monotheistic religions, all of which are seen to be important to America. (Bush, 16/10/2006)

To understand its implications, Bush's nationalism needs to be taken in context. The first eight months of the Bush presidency represented the end of a ten year period in which America had no significant enemy. Nationalist discourse was limited during this period and mainly focused on trying to stir up support for the policies of a weak, dubiously elected president. After 9/11 the situation was transformed; the attacks triggered a surge of nationalism that Bush could capture and channel into the legitimation of two foreign wars and a long term commitment to fight terrorism around the world. (Frum, 2003) This required a rhetorical focus on American bravery, sacrifice and the historical and global importance of the nation, themes which dominate many of his major speeches. As his position weakened and approval ratings fell over the next 5 years, these themes have remained dominant because of their legitimising role. I will analyse these trends in depth below.

What Makes a Good American?: Hard work, Compassion and Bravery/Sacrifice

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Bush's portrayal of American citizens serves many purposes; it valorises certain behaviours that are useful to the American state, encourages people to support policies supposedly good for American citizens, and provides a vital link between the individual and the state. Through celebrating and encouraging popular values and behaviours Bush makes it easy for ordinary people to take part in the work of the nation and affirm their sense of belonging. These themes are present in both peacetime and war but the emphasis changes significantly in the latter. I will examine this through the three most important attributes; the work ethic, compassion, and bravery and sacrifice.

The history of the twentieth century has propelled economic issues to a position of great importance within America. Its capitalist success was valorised during the Cold War and remains a source of pride during this period of American economic dominance. Bush has praised hard work, ingenuity, imagination, creativity, skill and daring within the American workforce throughout his period in office and made explicit links between individual success and the success of America as a whole, "America is successful because of the hard work, and creativity, and enterprise of our people." (20/09/2001) The construction of this link allows people to feel that they have a stake in national success merely through working hard. Most commonly these aspects of nationalist sentiment are placed in speeches made explicitly to the business class and linked to tax cut policies. (see Bush, 28/03/2001; 10/08/2006 among many examples) However, these skills and attitudes are also attributed to the military, (Bush, 25/05/2001) and encouraged in the general population through celebration of the workforce and emphasis on its essential role in making America great. (Bush, 01/09/2006)

A more emphasised trait is the compassion of the American people. This is certainly the dominant characteristic attributed to Americans before 9/11 and continues in a lesser role afterwards. Initially, compassion is celebrated as a justification for Bush's 'Faith Based Services' proposal to fund religious charities for their social work. (see Bush, 30/01/2001) Compassion is claimed as a national characteristic but also portrayed as primarily the domain of religious charities; implying a request to support these charities through legislation rather than to practice compassion per se. 9/11 marks a shift in Bush's rhetoric with the emphasis on the direct role of the public, "[w]e saw our country united in compassion as Americans came together to provide relief and bring hope to others." (Bush, 07/09/2006) Simple guidelines were provided to allow Americans to participate in the recovery from 9/11; through hugging their children, not discriminating against Muslims, and praying, (Bush, 20/09/2001) the public were assured of their connection to the tragedy and could derive feelings of shared pain, belonging, and involvement in a higher cause. As well as the public, the military is portrayed as a compassionate and peaceful institution. Involvement in peacekeeping missions in the Balkans is the basis for this pre-9/11 (Bush, 24/07/2001), but even afterwards, while fighting wars, Bush recounts stories of soldiers handing out sweets and rescuing injured Iraqis. (03/04/2003; 07/09/2006) These stories serve as a reaffirmation of American claims to the moral high ground, to boost morale and

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as encouragement to uphold those ideals which will win America the war.

Complimenting their compassionate nature, Bush speaks of Americans as strong, courageous and just. Pre-9/11 these characteristics were reserved for the military but afterwards this language, and accompanying tales of individual heroics, has come to dominate portrayals of the national character. Self-sacrifice is a pervasive theme throughout: in remembering 9/11 the principle heroes were the rescue workers who died in the twin towers and the passengers of 'flight 93' who crashed their plane to prevent its use in a terrorist attack (20/09/2001; 07/09/2006); in the midst of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, military recruits and civilian reconstruction volunteers take centre stage (18/05/2005); and throughout, those in the intelligence services and others who sacrificed their time and energy on 'homeland defence' are honoured (20/01/2005; 09/03/2006). Although focusing on spectacular acts, Bush relates these themes to ordinary people by focusing on the backgrounds of those who performed them, "we...witnessed something distinctly American: ordinary citizens rising to the occasion, and responding with extraordinary acts of courage." (11/09/2006) Again, Americans are provided with ways to participate, this time by volunteering to serve their country, specifically in the roles of firemen, soldiers, government officials and intelligence officers. In a slight twist to this theme, the declining popularity of the Iraq war has been met with new justifications for continuing based on the previous sacrifice of soldiers for the cause, "the men and women of our military are making great sacrifices to keep us safe. Some have suffered terrible injuries — and nearly 3,000 have given their lives...And we will never back down from the work they have begun." (11/09/2006)

The shifting emphasis in Bush's nationalism throughout his presidency can be clearly interpreted as a call to arms and mobilisation of the population. From encouraging values on behalf of specific policies, Bush switched to an emphasis on bravery and sacrifice in all situations, from military service to increased waiting times at airports. The values of compassion and hard work maintain their importance as they are important to the smooth running of government and the economy and are rhetorically linked to the grand themes of the American nation's collective virtue and strength.

Why is America Great?: Virtue and Strength

There are two major themes in the nationalism of President Bush which apply, not to individuals, but to America as a whole. These are America's virtue – its personification of the so-called 'universal truth' of freedom, and America's strength – its achievements and position of leadership in the world. These themes provide the grand narrative of Bush's nationalism; America's leadership of the 'free' or 'civilised' world against the forces of 'evil'. It is into this narrative that the call to sacrifice, compassion and hard work fits, allowing ordinary people to contribute to a higher

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cause with global and historical importance. This is a theme that most people are familiar with in the context of the 'war on terror' but which also clearly existed prior to it. In his first months of office, Bush spoke of America's history of opposing tyrants in the name of freedom (04/07/2001), mentioned America's continuing role in fighting against intolerance (24/07/2001), and identified enemies, "we are committed to defending America and our allies against ballistic missile attacks, against weapons of mass destruction held by rogue leaders in rogue nations that hate America, hate our values and hate what we stand for." (29/08/2001)

The primary values put forward in Bush's speeches are freedom, democracy, equality, and justice. (20/01/2001) However, these values are far from equally weighted; in thirty five speeches concerning both domestic and foreign policy across five years, 'freedom' is mentioned at least three times more often than the others combined. Freedom, described as universal (Bush, 17/02/2006), is the principle value that Americans are called to defend, both before and after 9/11. There is little in the tone of Bush's references to freedom that changed with 9/11, America's role as a "servant of freedom" was set out in his inaugural address (20/01/2001) and remained largely unchanged throughout his period in office, although much more frequently mentioned. (see Bush, 20/01/2005; 11/09/2006) Initially it was used primarily in speeches to the armed forces but, following the World Trade Centre attacks, it played a significant role in major speeches on the 'war on terror'. In a now famous line, "freedom itself is under attack", Bush equated the United States of America with freedom, making explicit his perception of America's virtue. (20/09/2001) However, he soon returned to the idea of freedom as a higher purpose which America has always been called to serve; it is the 'force of history' which justifies the sacrifice of American soldiers abroad and undermines critics at home. The battle is presented as being "between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right" leaving little space for opposition. (Bush, 20/01/2005)

America's leadership role is closely tied in to the notion of freedom. Although Bush mentions American economic, technological and military leadership as matters of national pride (17/12/2003; 04/09/2006; 11/09/2006), most often he speaks of America's role in leading the 'free' or 'civilised' world against 'evil'. This idea has legitimacy based on former conflicts of ideology, the fight against fascism in the Second World War, and against communism in the Cold War, where similar rhetoric was used. (Reagan, 1982) The notion of leadership is heavily emphasised in order to place American foreign policy in a particular global and historical context; in the battle of 'good' against 'evil' America is portrayed as the only hope for civilisation, "[t]he advance of human freedom – the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time – now depends on us." (Bush, 20/09/2001) This armageddon-like situation lends huge significance to America's foreign policy and justifies huge sacrifice. People can fight and die for freedom in the 'war on terror' with a clear conscience and confident in the knowledge that their sacrifice will "determine the destiny of millions across the world". (Bush, 11/09/2006)

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Conclusion

I have argued that President Bush presents an inclusive, civic nationalism in his public speeches. He rejects any ethnic basis for the nation and instead focuses on shared values and behaviour. These can be divided into characteristics of citizens and characteristics of the state.

Pre-9/11, the dominant behaviour attributed to citizens was compassion and this was linked to the introduction of new policy. The work ethic was also often mentioned in relation to tax cuts and the armed services were praised for their bravery and sacrifice. Nationalist rhetoric was fairly limited at this time but increased dramatically after 9/11. The emphasis of Bush's nationalism also changed at this time from compassion to bravery and self sacrifice. This was accompanied by the introduction of stories of 'ordinary people' doing 'extraordinary things' to inspire people, and guidelines on how to support the nation to allow everyone to participate in events and reaffirm their sense of belonging.

These individual characteristics tie in to the grand themes of the freedom and leadership of the American state. The narrative of a battle between good and evil with global and historical significance was present before 9/11 but greatly amplified afterwards. It provides a higher purpose for America's citizens, serves as a source of pride and as a justification for sacrifices. America's leadership is also important as part of the motivation for acting is the assumption that no one else is capable of standing up for 'civilisation'.

It is not within the scope of this essay to determine whether the general public subscribe to Bush's view of the nation and its role in the world. However, it is clear that as the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorate we can expect to see this vision sorely tested. Bush's ability to motivate the American people will certainly be necessary if he is to "lead the 21st century into a shining age of human liberty." (11/09/2006)

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