

# The Use of Dehumanizing Rhetoric in the War on Terror

Written by Ryannon MacLeod

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RYANNON MACLEOD, MAY 3 2010

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### **Of Men, Monsters, and the Antithesis of the American Dream: *The Use of Dehumanizing Rhetoric in the War on Terror***

In an age of modern media and communication, few can deny that in many ways the contemporary political landscape only sparsely resembles that of past decades. As banal and sophomoric as such an observation may be, the establishment of such an idea provides a backdrop for greater consideration – namely, to what extent, if any, has the rapid evolution of media and communications impacted political conventions? When placed within the context of peace and conflict studies such considerations can be reworked into a question regarding whether or not such evolved political climates have altered the wartime practices of modern states or governments. It is from the vantage of such questions and considerations that I drew the theme for my research – do the ways in which modern government leaders frame conflicts actually differ from historical examples? Specifically, does George W. Bush's rhetorical framing of the "War on Terror" conform to standard discourse regarding the practice of dehumanizing one's enemies in times of war?

In this essay I hope to prove that this example of modern conflict conforms to the established political war time convention of constructing enemies as less than human; through carefully crafted rhetorical practice, George W. Bush was able to formulate a narrative in which the enemies of the United States were not merely dehumanized, but cast as monstrous, murderous entities whose sole purpose was to destroy the American way of life. Before exploring the construction of reality put forth by Bush in regards to the war on terror, I shall begin by establishing a basic presentation of popular theory regarding dehumanization. Using this theoretical foundation I shall then offer an analysis of the rhetoric used by Bush in his public and political addresses between the dates of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I chose to examine the speeches made during this five year span as this period encompasses the transition from the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, through the initial constructions of "the enemy," and into the fully waged War on Terror. Though many addresses were given by the American President over these five years, I chose to focus upon those speeches that garnered the most publicity, as it would be these speeches – often *intended* to reach a large number of people – that would play a key role the construction of the 'enemies' of the United States.

While little to no persuasion is required to garner support for defensive acts of war upon a nation's invasion by foreign militant groups or armies, those governments seeking to engage in aggressive acts of war against other states face the ideological encumbrance of rallying public support for their cause. In these cases government leaders must rhetorically construct their enemies with dehumanizing language so as to exploit the ways in which the general masses perceive others. Such rhetorical construction of one's enemies is "fundamental to a nation's public support for war... Dehumanizing others renders the requisite horrors of war tolerable," (Elliot 2004, 99) and ensures that "no moral relationship with the (enemy) inhibits the victimizer's violent behaviour" (Haslam 2006, 254). Through carefully crafted narratives, government leaders are able to sculpt and shape socially constructed realities in such a way so as to "allow or even demand (its) citizens to undertake acts that would be universally rejected if they were directed

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towards 'true' human beings" (Anderson 2006, 739).

How, then, does one go about orchestrating such a sophisticated fabrication of reality? Successful dehumanization rests first within defining those which a government wishes to antagonize as "others," distinctly lacking a capacity for those characteristics associated with being innate to human nature; ultimately, the goal is to construct this definition in such a way so as to "emphasize that the 'other' is morally culpable of great crimes, thus less than human and deserving of punishment" (Boudreau and Polkinghorn 2008, 176). This is usually established in relation to ethnicity and race, with the "enemy" cast as being savages or barbarians lacking in culture, cognitive and rational capacities, morality, and self-restraint; the ideal portrayal is of a "savage [that] has brutish appetites for violence and sex, is impulsive, and prone to criminality" (Haslam 2006, 252). One effective means of denying a group inclusion to the human race through rhetoric is to explicitly liken the group's members to animals, insects, or parasites. Equally effective is the construction of a likeness to children, implicating a lack of development and autonomy. Put simply, if rhetoric is crafted in such a way so as to cast one's enemies as "lacking what distinguishes humans from animals, they should be seen [either] implicitly or explicitly as animal-like" (Haslam 2006, 258); the definitive goal is to define the reality of the intended enemy so that public perception associates the group, as well as the groups individual members, as *anything* but human (Elliot 2004).

No intense scrutiny or analysis is needed to find these basic founding elements of dehumanization entangled in even the most superficial components of Bush's "War on Terror" – the conflict itself is named in such a way so as to avoid explicitly naming any human opposition to American forces. Instead, the U.S military forces seek to conquer an abstract notion of evil, an "inhuman construct that no bullet can kill" (Elliot 2004, 100). However, such a fixation upon evil is far from a modern development for the Americans, and long precedes both the War on Terror and the tragedy of 9/11; whether it be government leaders of the Cold War era associating the Soviet Union with the idea of an empire of evil, or Adolf Hitler's immortalization as the personification of evil (Ivie 2007), George Bush's immediate invocation of evil imagery is hardly unprecedented. Though not an inherently unique approach, the president's rhetoric of evil was highly effective in that it immediately eradicated any space within the public perception for critical thought regarding terrorism, and those proposed "enemies" of the United States. From the very beginning of the War on Terror, absolutely every consideration "became a matter of national security as viewed through the lens of an evil threat" (Ivie 2007, 226). By resorting to a means of rhetorical definition of enemies founded in previous American conflicts, Bush's invocation of evil allowed for him to associate his wartime narratives with oppressive regimes of past, casting terrorists as "the heirs of fascism, totalitarianism and Nazism" (Maggio 2007, 822).

Bush explicitly highlighted this very association within his address to a joint session of congress on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, stating: "[those responsible for the attacks on 9/11] are the heirs of all murderous ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions – by abandoning every value except the will to power – they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism." Though this does not explicitly dehumanize those whom he opposes, the reliance upon past constructions of enemies of the United States allowed Bush to strongly associate those enemies to other groups who have long been accepted as lacking in human characteristics. This idea, along with the association to evil, is frequently re-emphasized in subsequent public addresses regarding the War on Terror that Bush gave over the next five years. Despite the strength of these ideological associations, Bush reinforces the dehumanized image they construct by including rhetoric of murder when speaking of his enemies.

Though not as inherently diabolical a concept as evil, the rhetoric of murder is perhaps more effective as it draws a direct link between those Bush wishes to dehumanize, and an understanding of the moral capacity to commit heinous criminal acts upon innocent individuals. Whether it be his continual reference to the attacks on 9/11 as "acts of murder" (for example, Bush 2001a, Bush 2001b, Bush 2002), or the statement that "The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name," (Bush 2001c) Bush is able to further deny membership to the human species to those enemies of the U.S by constructing for them a reality in which there is absolutely no capacity for innate human characteristics.

Though the rhetoric of evil and murder form the foundations for the dehumanization of the enemies of the United States, George W. Bush elaborates upon this by detailing explicit examples of the evil demonstrated by those enemies. Within his 2002 State of the Union Address Bush tells of the enemy's use of "poison gas to murder

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thousands of its own citizens – leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children.” This imagery is taken further within the 2003 State of the Union Address, within which Bush details the forced confessions obtained by the enemy by “torturing children while their parents are made to watch.” As if this were not enough to seal the dehumanized fate of those enemies of the U.S, Bush details the torture methodologies preferred by his enemies to be “electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping of acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues and rape.” Barbaric? Savage, brutish appetites for violence and sex? Morally culpable of great crimes? All of these key elements of dehumanization are evident within this one statement. By presenting the American people with such a graphic list outlining gruesome crimes, Bush not only suggests that his enemies are less than human, he demands that their identity be acknowledged as innately evil, monstrous, and horrific.

Though conventional means of dehumanization are not evident within the president’s rhetoric regarding his enemies within the War on Terror, George W. Bush is able to skilfully use ideas of evil and murder to fulfil the theoretical requirements of dehumanizing an enemy. By relying upon past constructions of evil, as well as graphic narratives of his enemy’s behaviour, Bush is able to present the American people with a portrait of an enemy who is completely devoid of human characteristics, who is without culture or morality, and who has a voracious appetite for gruesome crimes against humanity. One need only skim Bush’s rhetoric of evil to see his desired picture of an enemy who opposes freedom and democracy in all of its forms; of ruthless barbaric criminals who profane religion in order to justify their sacrificing of human life. The evil, deluded men of whom he spins tales are heartless, thrive in chaos and have absolutely no regard for human dignity. In this, Bush takes the practice of dehumanization to a whole new level – not only does he succeed as depicting those with whom he aims to engage in aggressive acts of war as less than human, he manages to craft a narrative in which those whom he wishes to conquer are the embodiment of evil, and everything which threatens the American way of life.

The conformity of Bush’s rhetoric of the War on Terror to traditional theories of dehumanization underscores the fact that, despite the many advances of modern society, the ways in which war is justified have evolved only insofar as to become more effective. Just as Edward Said’s *Orientalism* correlated the oft romanticized rhetorical creation of Asia and the Middle East within Western Culture to political aspirations of the Western world, it is imperative that similar lines be drawn between the contemporary construction of the War on Terror and the American political agenda. If the careful manipulation of language is indeed vital to the justification of aggressive acts of war, is it unfathomable to think that perhaps these same practices may be used to de-legitimize the very same acts? Though perhaps a naive insight at best, if the words we use are powerful enough to become inextricably intertwined with political justifications of war, should they not then be powerful enough to forever break the shackles of conflict plaguing global society?

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Written by: Ryannon MacLeod  
Written at: Memorial University of Newfoundland  
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