

HOW WORDS GO TO WAR: DOUBLESPEAK AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

Angel M. Arzán Santaella
University of Puerto Rico

ABSTRACT

This essay presents a rhetorical analysis guided by an epistemic merit model of propaganda of statements by the Bush administration on 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. The political language of these statements is a form of doublespeak that does not inform or explain but is used solely to buttress the credibility of the executive branch's position on the war in Iraq. This essay further characterizes this doublespeak language more precisely as *warspeak*, which is language created to persuade domestic public opinion to uncritically support the U.S. government's Iraqi policy. *Warspeak* is mired in euphemisms and logical fallacies that present a complex situation in simplistic and misleading terms. *Warspeak* is the opposite of plain English. To the wielders of *warspeak*, appeals to emotion are much more important than substance for presenting a policy that is increasingly unpopular at home.

ABSTRACTO

Este ensayo presenta un análisis retórico dirigido por un modelo de mérito epistémico de aseveraciones de propaganda por la administración Bush de "Operación Liberación Irak". El lenguaje político de estas aseveraciones es una forma de doble sentido que no informa o explica, sino que se usa solamente para impulsar la credibilidad de la posición de la rama ejecutiva en cuanto a la guerra en Irak. Este ensayo además caracteriza este lenguaje de doble sentido más precisamente como lenguaje de guerra, el cual es el lenguaje creado para persuadir la opinión pública a respaldar sin reservas la política iraquí del gobierno de los Estados Unidos. El lenguaje de guerra está manchado con eufemismos y falacias lógicas que presentan una situación compleja en términos simplistas y engañosos. El lenguaje de guerra es contrario al inglés sencillo. Para los usuarios del lenguaje de guerra, el apelar a las emociones es mucho más importante que la sustancia al presentar ante el país una política que es cada día menos popular.

Angel M. Arzán Santaella is a Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico. His main teaching and research interests are rhetoric, argumentative writing, and political language.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this essay is to examine the techniques underlying the warspeak of the Bush administration's "Iraqi Freedom" position. In late 2002, then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, said that the government of Iraq headed by Saddam Hussein had attempted to acquire from the African nation of Niger, fissionable material that could be used in the production of a nuclear weapon. In his January 28, 2003 State of the Union speech, President Bush claimed that "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." At the same time, the national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, quipped in relation to proof "...we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." In the same Blitzer interview, Rice said "There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein's regime is a danger to the United States and to its allies, to our interests." The implication was that the serious and perhaps imminent threat of a nuclear armed rogue state like Iraq could only be ignored at the risk of catastrophic damage to American territory.

The allegation against Iraq subsequently proved to be false. In fact, according to a FAIR (2003) press release, the Niger story, as documented by journalist Seymour Hersh (and others), was based on crudely forged documents. Additionally, the administration's own investigation in March 2002 concluded that the story was bogus. However, I do not intend to argue that Bush, Powell, or Rice consciously or deliberately lied. It was the effect of the allegation that is significant. I contend that the veracity of the suspicion was irrelevant to the officials at the time because the plausibility of such peril meshed perfectly with decisions already taken. The truth of the acquisition of nuclear bomb-making material was not as important as projecting a menacing image of an enemy of the United States. Most important to the architects of the policy was to lend a veneer of credibility to the president's declarations about nefarious Iraqi intentions. It was

the convenient backing of a predetermined policy that made the use of this ‘intelligence’ appropriate and in my view a perfect example of *warspeak*.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis follows the model offered by Sheryl Tuttle Ross’¹ epistemic merit model of propaganda. It incorporates a communication model that is familiar to rhetoricians as the dialectical interaction of message, speaker, and audience. Ross developed the model in response to theories that she felt were too narrow, and did not include social situation. As a model for propaganda, Ross sees the desire to persuade as intentional and adhering to certain conditions. The most important condition for our purposes is that “propaganda is sent on behalf of a sociopolitical institution organization [the White House in our case] or cause” (Ross, 2002). Nevertheless, propaganda is ultimately an ‘epistemic struggle to challenge other thoughts’.

Ross claims that it is misleading to say that propaganda is simply false because the propagandist can and usually does believe the view that s/he expounds. This is particularly applicable to the propaganda of the Iraqi war. It is not only ideology that conditions propaganda but the context in which the message is formed. I believe this part of Ross’ theory is relevant because I do not ascribe sheer lying or cynicism to the spokespersons of the Bush administration that defend the war. Rather, I assume that they believe that there are higher issues so paramount that strict adherence to the literal truth is not mandatory. Consequently, we as citizens must be more vigilant about what is done in our name and allegedly for our security.

The reason that even relevant propaganda remains deceptive is that its epistemology is weak and defective. Not including all the facts, ignoring counter evidence, and fallacious

¹ Sheryl Tuttle Ross. “Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art”. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 16-30.

reasoning are types of thinking that are epistemically defective. Propaganda, like *warspeak*, is epistemically defective. *Warspeak* is conducted to function independently of rational debate or careful deliberation. It does not pass the test of reliable evidence. There are a number of criteria that an open-minded but skeptical audience should expect of government policy decisions. First, is there enough evidence to support the justification for action? Secondly, are the data chosen representative, that is, not an exception or extreme case? Equally important to us as the target of persuasion is the correctness of evidence; are the facts accurate and current? Lastly, are the facts relevant to the claim being made?² These criteria as well as the examples given are what determine *warspeaks*' truth-value.

Warspeakers know and use the most powerful strategies. Proponents of war must exploit what the public wants to hear. It is human to want to believe the best about ourselves. Therefore, *warspeak* language is set to be simple, repetitious, and emotionally charged. When it comes to war, a visceral reaction is good. Concurrently, the Bush White House cannot deviate from its initial propaganda because the credibility of its positions is under constant pressure. Proposing war must overcome objections from both partisan supporters and other 'interested parties' (such as special interest groups). Furthermore, the fog of war creates pressure that the political policy cannot ignore. Hence, the Bush administration crafts its communication strategies to sell what the public wants to buy and acknowledges that all citizens do not want the same thing (Beyond Hegemony, 1996). The public as buyer must beware.

What further supports the claim that *warspeak* is propaganda in our model is that every position or policy statement must make the decision to go to war appear to be forced upon us by an eminent and ruthless menace. All guilt falls on the enemy and every press release corroborates the guilt of the enemy. Thus, *warspeak* coincides with both Ross and classical propaganda theory

² Richard Fulkerson as quoted in "Writing Arguments" p. 110.

by reflecting what Hannah Arendt wrote sixty years ago; “the necessities of propaganda are always dictated by the outside world” (1948). There are always larger issues than close adherence to all the facts or entire truth. The result is truncated rational debate and the absence of careful deliberation.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

This essay examines *warspeak*, i.e., words to excuse war. It argues that politics and ideology bend language to entice citizens to support a policy without examining facts or considering implications. Language is not used for truth value but for its persuasive appeal. *Warspeak* is found in media sound bites and headlines, press interviews, congressional hearings, and the speeches of high echelon government officials. Currently, *warspeak* is the language that is most often heard in the public arena about Middle Eastern foreign policy. It is the ‘spin’ that sets and defines the parameters of debate on the question of war. In defense of straight talk and a genuine debate, I present a rhetorical analysis of some public pronouncements made to justify the United States invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

The basic technique of *warspeak* is known as *framing* in rhetorical theory. Framing means defining or adjusting the parameters of the issue in a way that is most favorable to your position. As in photography, framing is deciding what is going to be central to the viewer. What is more important the object, or setting? *Framing* is making a claim that depends on the assumptions one believes would most likely persuade the intended audience. Relying on framing (spin used in sustaining the will for war) induces us to approve a course of action in our name for a ‘good reason’.

WARSPREAK

A good example of warspeak is found in the change of *casus belli* toward Iraq. Few can forget that incessant case made against the government of Iraq as the possessor of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), culminating in the March 2003 invasion. The cause for war was WMDs. But no WMDs were found. Within months of the start of hostilities, the U.S. war effort changed abruptly and almost seamlessly from a preemptive strike to secure weapons of mass destruction to 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' became the seeding and nurturing a democratic government in Iraq as the core reason of U.S. intervention. This swift transformation was meant to break (and have everyone forget) months of WMD hysteria and still appear "always to have been right, whatever the actual outcome" (Chambers, 2003). By obfuscating the repeated threat of Iraqi WMD, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' bestows on the U.S. the mantle of being right and holding the 'moral high ground'. The operation downplays wartime violence and dissipates state self-interest. Thus, the framing of the invasion suggests that military and civil casualties are ultimately a good thing for the Iraqi people.

Democracy and currently defeating Al-Qaeda became objectives that had not been often mentioned before the invasion but suddenly became marks of success. Since it is freedom that the U.S. seeks, it is not important to wonder why a powerful, well armed, evil, enemy such as Hussein's Republican Guards was routed in a scant three weeks with minimal casualties to the invading forces and devastating casualties to the enemy both military and civilian. Thus, while no WMDs were found and the administration had to concede that Saddam's Iraq had no direct links to al-Qaeda, the U.S. was still vindicated because they ousted a bloody dictator. Hussein, and Hussein alone, was the only obstacle to Iraqi liberty and world peace. It became apparent

within months that the original case for war had been botched (Freedman, 2002). *Warspeak* became necessary to cover a rush to judgment and exonerate the policy's architects.

Another common *warspeak* thread to the intervention in Iraq is Al-Qaeda and the 'War on Terror'. Bush supporters of the current policy in the Middle East make Al-Qaeda, the 'War on Terror', and Iraq, synonymous. The thread started with 9/11, generates the Al-Qaeda led insurgency and finally recognizes terrorists as the main obstacle to the formation of a democratic Iraqi government. By consistently and constantly linking Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi war, the U.S. government has kept the trauma and rage of the 9/11 attack alive as an additional reason / justification for war. The events of 9/11 are used to appeal to feelings of solidarity among Americans as victims of an unprovoked attack.

The terrorists that the U.S. fights in Iraq are the perpetrators of 9/11, and fighting them in Iraq prevents them from attacking the Homeland.¹ This argument contains a logical error named false dilemma (also called the either / or fallacy). The president argues that there are two and only two alternatives conditioning the U.S. presence in Iraq. This oversimplifies a complex issue that many would see as having more than two choices or in practice a number of options. Concurrently, the president's insistence 'on staying the course' also 'begs the question', since to him fighting in Iraq is fighting terrorism because that is where the terrorists are. This contention is patently circular reasoning; it begs the question because the reasoning is merely a restatement of his own claim.

Moreover, there are several overlapping appeals to the emotions of an audience (public) when seeing the enemy only as terrorists. First, there is the desire to engage the public's fear and patriotism. Spokespersons play on fear, while portraying an image of protecting the nation via strong and decisive action. Supporting the administration's Iraq policy (without recourse to

empirical evidence) will promote the security all citizens want. The *warspeak* phrase, ‘War on Terror’ is then illustrative of the corollary of framing, namely, the appeal to beliefs and emotions rather than logic. The ‘War on Terror’ plays on patriotism and fear. Those who agree with the Bush styled ‘War on Terror’ make emotional appeals “whenever they connect their claims to the public’s values, thus triggering positive or negative emotions “depending on whether these values are affirmed or transgressed” (Ramage, 2007). The desire is to plea to visceral passions. Emotional arguments are made more convincing when they are reduced to a simple stance. “You are either with us or against us in the fight against terrorism” said President Bush³ in the face of massive protests against invading Iraq in Europe and the U.S.

Initially, the ‘War on Terror’ was supposedly the multi-front effort to capture those responsible for 9/11 and bring them to justice. However, the phrase has certainly morphed into a reason, a policy, a strategy, or even a tactic, depending on context. The ‘War on Terror’ demanded the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the regime in power. However, at the same time the ‘War on Terror’ seems to demand little from other rogue states, like Sudan. The Sudanese regime and its leader General Bashir are widely accused of genocide and were at one time (like the Taliban) a host and protector of Osama Bin Laden. Nevertheless, in classic *warspeak* fashion the ‘War on Terror’ requires regime change in Iraq but little more than strong diplomatic language against Sudan. The ‘War on Terror’ justifies the military removal of an Iraqi government that brutally represses its own people (including genocide) but does not call for the removal of the Sudanese leaders who brutally direct the murder and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children in the western Sudanese region of Darfur.

The ‘War on Terror’ is a euphemism for the occupation of Iraq and is used by many interchangeably with the situation on the ground in Iraq. Iraq is the ‘War on Terror’. What at one

³ During a joint news conference with French President Jacques Chirac on November 6, 2001.

time was sold as a world-wide effort not confined to particular borders and not primarily a military strategy has in essence become the ‘be all’ of ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’. Hence the ‘War on Terror’ is so vague and amorphous that it explains and defends the many obvious contradictions in U.S. policy, for example, toward Sudan. Sudan is a bellwether. The Sudanese contradiction is papered over by allusion to that government’s alleged support to the U.S. ‘War on Terror’ by providing intelligence on terrorism⁴. Thus ‘valuable’ help from a despicable, rogue source is excused because it allegedly aids the legitimate, national security need of self-defense.

Reference to national security without elaboration becomes a mantra in the Iraqi context. Informed opinion makes it necessary to scrutinize the connotations and / or denotations of particular word choice. Terminology that is ill-defined, but lofty sounding may be necessary to enhance the credibility² of the speaker but doesn’t inform the listener. Thus, the phrase ‘support the troops’ suggests that the speaker is favorable to soldiers in harm’s way. Inversely saying someone does not ‘support the troops’ is a bludgeon used against critics of the war to imply that they want to see members of the armed forces killed or wounded. Incredibly, those who want troops out of combat are ‘betraying’ the army in the field, and those who continue to accept (albeit sadly) mounting casualties are actually giving aid and comfort to the front line combatants. The world becomes bizarre. Ironically, patriots are those who value and appreciate the death and pain suffered by our side, while the advocates of ending the war are only interested in bringing the troops home and negating the sacrifice of those who defend our liberty. ‘Supporting the troops’ implies that even if the strategy is flawed, we are already committed and therefore questioning the assumptions for the war hurts soldiers and marines. ‘Bring the troops

⁴ Ken Silverstein. “Official Pariah Sudan Valuable to America’s War on Terrorism”. *Los Angeles Times*. 29 Apr. 2005.

home” sends the wrong message of defeatism, while continued bloodshed proclaims our commitment and resolve to peace and democracy. An end to war, dishonors those who have paid the highest price. The war may be going badly, but we only hurt ourselves by disengagement. Questioning a failed policy and incompetent leadership exposes our boys and girls to harm according to unflinching boosters for the war in Iraq. Essentially ‘support the troops’ is doublespeak.

Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it (Lutz, 1996).³

As George Orwell once said that political language [used when rallying public opinion for war] has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. For example, we have the ‘intelligence failure’ (a euphemism for getting it wrong) regarding WMD before the invasion. At the time, both the media and Congress focused on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The failure concerned connecting Saddam Hussein directly with Al-Qaeda according to intelligence sources. Recently, the United States Senate began investigating the source of a connection that proved to not exist. In the course of the investigation, the paper trail led to the Defense Department (DOD) and the policy office of Douglas Feith. In February 2007, Pincus and De Young of the Washington Post reported a finding made by the DOD's acting Inspector General (IG). The IG affirmed that the Pentagon policy office briefing to higher-ranking policymakers on a direct Al-Qaeda / Iraq connection was an ‘alternative intelligence assessment on Iraq and Al-Qaeda relations’ which was ‘inconsistent’ with the intelligence community's consensus view. That conclusion led the Inspector General to say that while the

compiling of the report under scrutiny was not illegal “the actions, in our opinion were inappropriate.” (Pincus & De Young, 2007). A reasonable person might infer from this bureaucratese that while it is not against the law to fabricate facts, it is not a good work practice.

Concretely, what started as a position paper and later was translated into a briefing came to the conclusion that there had been a direct contact between a senior Iraqi intelligence agent and Mohammed Atta (the leader of the 9/11 attack). The CIA held that the source for that meeting was not credible, although the CIA refused to say so directly. However, what is telling about the paper / briefing produced by Feith, the former undersecretary of defense for policy, is that the intelligence review was specifically authorized by then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz. What is germane to an understanding of *warspeak* is the fact that Wolfowitz wrote a memo to Feith saying the Feith’s briefing was ‘excellent’ and on the way to ‘illuminate the differences between us and the CIA’ and finally admitted that ‘the goal is not to produce a consensus product but rather to scrub one another’s arguments’. To the DOD Inspector General, it would appear that asking for intelligence reports that tell you what you want to hear is only ‘inappropriate’. If the point is still not clear, Mr. Feith defended his office, rejected the vague terms of the IG and categorically said the briefing ‘did not present an alternative analysis’ but ‘presented a criticism’ (although not a factual one according to the IG).

PLAIN WARSPEAK

There are various features of political wordplay that make *warspeak* equivalent to coordinated propaganda. One is the demonization of the enemy. The propagandist appeals to the audience’s hate and fear. Labels for the enemy in Iraq are to ensure that none of the armed (or even political) resistance against U.S. forces is justified by intentional actions. At least no

opposition is acknowledged. The 140,000 American troops are not the cause of fighting and only Al-Qaeda Islamic terrorists who 'hate freedom' could see the U.S. presence as an occupation. In the selling of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', the United States bears no responsibility for death, destruction, or the generation of millions of refugees. To the architects of the war against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, there is no popular resistance to the U.S. Therefore terms like occupation, Arab nationalism, guerrillas, rebels or simple armed hostility to foreign control is hardly mentioned in official or media reporting. The possibility that there may be nationalistic violent enmity to U.S. presence is not even considered much less actually discussed.

Therefore, American senior military commanders insist on referring to themselves as 'coalition forces'. Trying to operationalize 'coalition forces' in concrete terms belies the misleading nature of the catchphrase. In March of 2003, only the armed forces of two nations participated in the toppling of the Iraqi government, namely, the United States and the United Kingdom. Of those solitary allies, the British provided less than fifteen percent of the total invading force. The empty words that justified the unilateral action affected the image of the U.S. in the eyes of the world. Thus, the image had to be presented more positively. The U.S. then sought to build 'the coalition of the willing'. As of August 23, 2006, there were 21 non-U.S. military forces contributing troops to the coalition forces in Iraq (Globalsecurity, 2007). In November 2006, coalition troop numbers were down from a high of 25,600, in January 2004, to 18,000. Therefore, from the beginning 89% of the coalition forces were American (U. S. Department of State, 2007). The overwhelming majority of those non-American 11% are not combat troops but support units of one kind or another. Eventually even the British began drawing down forces (from a high of 40,000 to 5,000) in order to allegedly participate more actively in Afghanistan (Globalsecurity, 2007). British forces have sustained approximately 150

killed in action in comparison to over 3,400 for U.S. service personnel. A CNN.com special report demonstrates that in reality (on the ground) the U.S. has carried more than 90% of the combat and casualty burden of the coalition forces engaged in war.⁴

Another aspect of evading unpleasant facts is the problem of what the U.S. labels as Iraqis - especially the ones that U.S. forces kill. Some labels for those armed combatants killed are 'terrorists', 'insurgents', 'fighters', 'militias', and 'sectarian armies'. The implication is that these organized enemy forces are armed and dangerous but in no way legitimate. In the administration's view, the U.S.' self proclaimed role is only to help the Iraqi people and budding democratic government help themselves. Furthermore, the elected Iraqi government has officially asked for U.S. support. Therefore, most, if not all, of the combatants arrayed against coalition forces are by definition not representative of the government or of the general population. The presence of U.S. troops is not responsible for the violence. There is also no official recognition of the composition of these non-government non-popular forces. To take *warspeak* at face value, the core enemy are terrorists and foreign fighters. The next contingent is former Baath party insurgents whose only interest is destroying democracy and regaining political power. Finally there are militias and sectarian groups whose goal is ethnic cleansing. All of these forces combine into typically sectarian violence with occasional glimpses of civil war.

PLAIN ENGLISH

The fog of war in Iraq is, of course, more complex, less clear-cut and much less favorable to the division 'between them and us' than President Bush would have the public believe. Not all observers see the warring factions as against the Iraqi government. Some would say the warring

factions are the government. Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Shiite Muslim cleric is part of the elected government. Shiite politicians loyal to Sadr hold 30 seats in the parliament as well as eight portfolios in the cabinet. His political influence maintains the current Prime Minister in power. It is telling that the Mehdi Army of this same cleric is one U.S. Marines have met in sustained pitched battles twice. Moreover, after Al-Sadr avoided arrest and military defeat at the hands of the U.S. army, his Mehdi army is actually stronger than it was in 2004, and may number up to 60,000. Before 2006, Al-Sadr usually had adjectives such as renegade, radical, minor cleric before his name. But recently, Al-Sadr is reported “as one of the most powerful people in Iraq” (Garrels, 2007). As a political force Al-Sadr is firmly in the government and just as firmly anti-U.S. From 2003 to the present, Al-Sadr has been uncompromising in his statements that the Americans leave Iraq immediately and without condition.

The sloganeering of ‘Operational Iraqi Freedom’ is contentious. As part of the *warspeak* used by the U.S. government to pursue the war in Iraq such slogans have served to mask self-serving or base motives and avoid addressing issues in human terms. As conscientious citizens, we should expect, if not demand, that we clearly understand what any administration is actually saying and what its words mean in actions. Language has power. Debate should appeal as much to reason and logic as to emotions and beliefs. It is to our advantage to be vigilant about misuses of language with pernicious political consequences. It was *warspeak* that put the motivation for military action in the realm of first self-defense and then altruism. To the Bush / Cheney White House, the nation was going to war because it had to, not because it wanted to.

At the same time the sacrifices being made were not just for U.S. interests but the interests of the international community and established American values. War against Iraq was not a political stand but a matter of American survival. More forthrightly, justification for war

was gauged to sugarcoat, if not distort the truth, for political necessity. None of the arguments advanced have led to the regional peace and stability that any of the nations involved sought. It is obvious that the U.S. cannot impose a successful outcome. What should be pursued is debate about Iraq as plain speaking dialogue in search of solutions instead of name-calling and appeals to emotion. Ultimately, not *warspeak* but the language of diplomacy and political compromise may be the right and best way to support our military and democracy at the same time.

Notes

¹ Even the choice of the term *homeland* is a part of warspeak because the choice of “homeland” keeps the image of the U.S. separate from any negative associations coming from the Russian “motherland” or the Nazi German “fatherland”.

² Aristotle argued that the trust that a speaker gains is found in the speech of the speaker. The impact of the speaker’s credibility is the appeal from *ethos*. John D. Ramage. Writing Arguments: Rhetoric with Readings. 7th ed. (New York: Longman, 2007), p. 131.

³ William Lutz, The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 4.

⁴ In addition, at least 25,594 U.S. troops have been wounded in action through May 23 2007. Michael O’Hanlon and Jason Campbell. “Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq.” The Brookings Institution. (24 May 2007), p. 16.

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