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# <Terrorism> in the Age of Obama: The Rhetorical Evolution of President Obama's Discourse on the <War on Terror>

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This project began as part of the 2012 Adrian Tinsley Summer Research Grant Program under the direction of Dr. Jason Edwards. Kelly has accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at North Carolina State University to pursue a Master of Science degree in Communication to continue her studies in the field, with hopes to focus on media and visual culture as well as political rhetoric.

*Since the events that transpired on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, <terrorism> has become a part of the vocabulary of modern American culture. The word <terrorism> has become a powerful ideograph--a word or phrase that is abstract in nature, but has a great deal of ideological power--in American culture. This commonly used abstract word can be heard almost daily in the media and within the larger lexicon of American political discourse. Rhetoricians use the word to describe their motives and persuade audiences to align their ideological principles with those of the larger cause. This study examines how during President Barack Obama's first year in office, he utilizes <terrorism> in opposition to the <rule of law> and <democratic values> in order to create a hybrid identity which combines the Democratic and Republican understanding of the issue that ultimately contributes to a sense of <exceptionalism>.*

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the word <terrorism> has helped to shape and has been shaped by the culture of the American people who have come into contact with this concept on a daily basis in the media for over a decade. Because of this powerful ideograph, soldiers have fought and died in wars against a new breed of enemy in a battle against an idea; policies have shifted and changed along with protocols of collecting intelligence; lines have been drawn, crossed, and altogether erased in the metaphorical sands of alliance. History offers itself as proof that word wielded in the correct way can be more powerful than any superpower's arsenal of military weaponry. <Terrorism> is one such word.

<Terrorism> is an example of what rhetorical scholars call an ideograph, which is a high order abstraction found in everyday language used in political discourse which warrants the use of military, legislative, or financial power, excuses behavior and belief that might otherwise be considered eccentric or anti-social, and guides behavior and belief. An ideograph is also transcendent in nature – “having as much power and influence over the ruler as it has on the ruled” (McGee 1980). In order for the call to collective commitment to be successful, the individual using the ideograph is equally as invested in its definition as the general public who chooses to align their ideologies with it.

Carol Winkler (2006) has explored how <terrorism> has been used by presidents since World War II. Winkler concluded that in the post-World War Era, two distinct and separate ideologies had formed in the ways that

Democratic and Republican presidents used <terrorism>. Democrats understand the issue of combating <terrorism> in the context of the justice system: <terrorism> is a criminal act that should be dealt with through means of police enforcement and punishable by judicial trial. Republicans see the <War on Terror> as a battle of good versus evil governed by morality. George W. Bush used <terrorism> to unite the nation and the world against a common ideological enemy, ushering in a new paradigm of foreign policy, marvelously Republican in nature. America's new era, the <War on Terror>, would mean that the United States would have to tackle a new, diabolical enemy. Facing this foe would mean two of the longest and most expensive conflicts in the history of mankind.

President Barrack Obama, during his first year in office, inherited this new era, as well as a foreign policy badly damaged by President Bush's prosecution of the <War on Terror>. How did President Obama use <terrorism> as he put forth his foreign policy agenda?

### Literature Review

Across contexts, the meanings of words and power wielded by them changes and shifts dramatically. This is especially true in the case of high order abstractions, known as ideographs, which are terms, phrases, and images central to political ideology. According to McGee (1980) an ideograph is "an ordinary language term found in political discourse...representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal that warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief that might otherwise be seen as eccentric or anti-social, and also guides behavior and belief" (p. 15). In other words, ideographs have different functions and meanings for different demographic groups – racial, regional, religious, financial, gender, or generation – at different times in history. Those functions and meanings hold unique symbolic qualities that summarize prevailing attitudes and characteristics of a particular community.

For example, <equality> is an ideograph that may hold different meanings for different groups over time and space. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that separate spaces were equal in terms of resources and quality of schooling (Hasian & Condit, 1996). Although the term separate but equal was coined from *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the reality was that African-American children had far less access to <equal> educational opportunities. *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. In 1954, SCOTUS reversed the separate but equal doctrine in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. The Court argued the only possible way to achieve the goal of <equality> was to fully integrate the public school systems. <Equality> as defined in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, was the first action in the

larger movement to desegregate public institutions within the United States. The ideograph of <equality> demonstrates how ideographs can provide different understandings of political precepts over time, while also offering intellectual support for specific policies and ideologies that can fundamentally alter a political culture.

Ideographs can be analyzed in either a synchronic or diachronic fashion. Synchronic analysis is analogous to a snapshot or "vertical" approach because rhetorician is attempting to capture how that specific instance of an ideograph is being used at a singular point in time. For example, Amernic and Craig (2004) explored a Southwest Airlines (SWA) letter to shareholders following the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Their analysis produced "an example, in the extreme case of...cultural ideographs being appropriated to serve corporate ends" (p. 327). Specifically, Amernic and Craig asserted SWA utilized the <Let's Roll> allegory of Todd Beamer of United Airlines' Flight 93 to imply that "SWA is an American (in the same manner as Todd Beamer) with 'iron character', 'unquenchable spirit', and 'inspiring altruism'" (p. 332). In other words, <Let's Roll> symbolized the character of Southwest Airlines in that moment and time.

Analyzing ideographs diachronically works by sampling how a specific ideograph is used over a range of time, assessing its potential evolution within contemporary culture (e.g. the equality example from earlier). For instance, Towner (2010) examined the top selling country music group the Dixie Chicks. In 2004, the Dixie Chicks caused a media firestorm by criticizing President Bush's prosecution of the <War on Terror>. Towner analyzed how the Dixie Chicks used the ideograph <patriotic>. He concluded that over time the use of <patriotic> by the Dixie Chicks came to mean multiple ideas, including the "exercise of <free speech>, <patriotic> as questioning/dialogue, <patriotic> as a voice of dissent, and <patriotic> as love for America" (p. 302). While their use of the ideograph <patriotic> divorced the band from their hardcore country fans, it introduced them to the larger American and global public, skyrocketing them to greater success than before.

Ultimately, ideographs have proven to be an effective means of examining a number of different rhetorical subjects. Pertinent to this study is how political leaders have used ideographs to advance their causes. For example, Althouse and Kuypers (2009) assert that John Pym, a member of the English House of Parliament during the reign of King Charles I, was able to enact legislation that would restrict the powers of both the royal throne and the church influence over Parliament. His appropriation of the ideographs <law>, <religion>, <justice>, and <Parliamentary Privilege> led the way to

reviving democracy in the House of Commons. These ideas would later prove influential in underwriting Anglo-American liberalism that would emerge in the American colonies over one hundred years later. Fast forward three hundred years later to contemporary England where British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used the ideograph <terrorism> as a key factor in casting the situation within Northern Ireland as an <epic tragedy>. The juxtaposition of these ideographs allowed her to finagle an excuse to the media coverage of her campaign against Irish Republican Army (IRA), while also creating the symbolic groundwork to allow severe restrictions be put upon other civil liberties (Parry-Giles, 1995). By providing a state of necessity, she was able to get the public to accept her actions, even get them to ideologically align themselves with her prosecution of Britain's terror fight against the IRA in the 1980s, demonstrating their collective commitment in a situation where normally her policies would have been viewed as dictatorial and tyrannical.

The <terrorism> ideograph has also been a fundamental topic in presidential rhetoric. Winkler (2006) examined how American presidents since World War II have used this pejorative term in U.S. public discourse, and that Democrats and Republicans used it differently, which help serve and frame their overall foreign policy principles and specific foreign policy decisions. Valenzano (2006) extended Winkler's findings by focusing on how President George W. Bush juxtaposed the ideographs <freedom> and <terror> together. He found that although Bush probably did not intend to juxtapose the two terms, he did manage to rally the nation against a common, universal enemy via his ambiguous use of the term <freedom> and manipulate the definition of <terror> to include "the threat of action, not just action itself" (p. 161). Understanding how presidents use the ideograph of <terrorism> can provide insight into the specific policies they will enact in U.S. foreign policy and how that might impact America's role in the world. This is because their actions must continue the ideological current circuiting through their rhetoric, or else the call for collective commitment will be unsuccessful.

From these various studies we can draw some important conclusions. First, analyzing ideographs can be an important way of creating and understanding a particular vocabulary of a specific organization, social movement, and/or political party. Understanding these ideographs can determine specific motives, precepts, and policies rhetors to provide. Second, for the purpose of this study, analyzing ideographs within presidential rhetoric, particularly <terrorism> can assist us as United States citizens in understanding what, why, and how power is attained, maintained, and exercised across different contexts and circumstances. Ideographs are a powerful way

to ascertain the motives, movements, and policies of various rhetors. In the following section, I extend the work of Winkler (2006) and Valenzano (2006) by examining how President Obama used the ideograph <terrorism> during his first year in office.

### **Methodology**

In order to conduct an analysis of how President Obama used the ideograph <terrorism> I conducted a textual analysis of various speeches made by President Obama during his first term. I was able to locate these speeches from the American Presidency Project database run by the University of Southern California. It is a database that has every public pronouncement of American presidents since the founding of the Republic. Initially, I conducted a term search for the word "terrorism". That led to over hundreds of different public documents using the term. I then narrowed my data set even further by eliminating public pronouncements that were not speeches and only mentioned <terrorism> in passing. I focused my analysis only on speeches that were dedicated to the specific discussion of <terrorism> and U.S. foreign policy, save for President Obama's State of the Union Address. I included the State of the Union because it is arguably the most important policy speech a president will offer during any given year (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). After narrowing my search I was left with over a dozen speeches to analyze. From there I began to read and take extensive notes, concluding that the most suitable approach to this subject would be a diachronic evaluation, assessing common patterns and dominant themes arising over time. This finally culminated in the development of several undeniably independent yet unmistakably interwoven themes that work together to highlight certain attributes each other and enhance their importance. In the discussion that follows, I do not use passages from each speech, but the textual fragments cited are representative samples of President Obama's use of <terrorism>.

### **President Obama's First Year of <Terrorism>**

When President Obama entered office in January of 2009, the Iraq War had been underway for six years, and the conflict would not be resolved for another three. To this day, the United States remains in Afghanistan after beginning the military expedition back in 2001, less than a month following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. At the time Obama took office, public opinion of the two conflicts was extremely negative and had been on the decline for quite some time. On top of that, the nations of the world had borne witness to the previous administration's disastrous foreign policy dealings, and Obama had to devote time and energy to repairing relationships and restoring the country's reputation. Most importantly, he inherited an ideological responsibility to transition the public

from <terrorism> as Bush defined it to his own, understanding and execution of the term in his own rhetoric.

### <Terrorism> as Threat to Democratic Values

President Obama's primary concern with the <terrorist> threat to democratic values was the undermining of them by <terrorist> groups, which are lawless organizations that do not operate under a constitution, in which anarchy reigns and chaos is king. Our sense of American identity is built upon our democratic values, specifically our unique understanding of the <rule of law>. Obama believed that the best offense is a good defense, and in preserving and maintaining the rule of law, we were to effectively combating terrorism by foiling it. Otherwise, the United States would fall into a similar state of lawlessness, madness, and turmoil.

In order to demonstrate a necessity for engaging in combat with <terrorist> forces, Obama made their strikes against us personal rather than political. This is reminiscent of George W. Bush's famous statement following the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001: "if you're not with us, you're for <terrorism>." By striking at the heart of American ideals, the lone <terrorist> and the organization they represent strike at American identity. This sense of a collective self stems from the democratic values which our Declaration of Independence is based on: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Obama (2009g) emphasized that: "The main goal of <terrorists> is not only to spread fear and sow the seeds of instability, but also to undermine the basic values of our societies." Obama reasoned that by spreading fear and sowing the seeds of instability, the <terrorist(s)> would have undermined our basic societal values and that by doing so, they would shake the foundation of our nation. It is a self-sustaining, dependent relationship between the two variables. His usage of the term "fear" as a weapon used by <terrorist> to accomplish their goals is highly sentimental of President Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugural address: "we have nothing to fear but fear itself".

This idea of combating fear as a method of weakening the <terrorist> opposition is simple and effective for the reason that it gives power back to the people. By specifically juxtaposing the <rule of law> against <terrorism>, Obama implied that one of the direct results from letting the "bad guys" win would be injustice and anarchy, a process of spiraling out of control. It puts a stopper in the plan to spread fear and sow the seeds of instability, and therefore the basic values of our society are not in jeopardy. This is why Obama used the <rule of law> specifically rather than grouping it in a general matter with the rest of our democratic values – its existence is critical in order for the others to be available, let alone successful.

The physical acts of <terror> committed are a means to achieve the end – a thriving culture of fear and panic. The United States is a symbol of freedom, hope, and prosperity in the modern world; through intimidation, destruction, and murder, <terrorists> wish to extinguish the beacon of light that is America. Obama (2009e) stated that, "I believe that our Nation is stronger and more secure when we deploy the full measure of both our power and the power of our values, including the rule of law." By encouraging the nation to rally around the core values of the American way of life, this further makes bullet-proof the ideas that strengthen feelings of patriotism that ultimately foils the terrorist plot. He juxtaposed the power of foreign policy, implicitly militaristically speaking, with the power of our values which soldiers fight to defend, therefore justifying the expenditure of troops overseas to fight the common enemy: <terrorism>.

President Obama illustrated that <rule of law> is the foundation upon which our <democratic values> are built, hence why he so specifically isolated the former in his foreign policy rhetoric. However, he spent a good deal of time emphasizing that, "... the most effective response to their criminal strategy remains the promotion of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and equitable social conditions" (2009g). Obama had thrust the focus not on the opposition, but on the American team working together under the banner of the American dream. This exemplified the fact that <terrorists>, although clever and cunning of wit in the execution of their wicked deeds, do not have an over-arching goal to be achieved. Should their agenda ever be fulfilled, the organization would implode upon itself, for their identity stems only from their opposition and determination to destroy American identity. This is because the rhetoric of <terrorist> organizations does not have such strong values underlining their causes – meanwhile, American democratic values carry with them centuries of idealistic ideological baggage, and that, according to President Obama's rhetoric, is worth its weight in the fight for freedom.

By developing an ideological justification for the conflicts that the United States was involved in at the time, Obama remedied much of the damage done by the Bush administration. Simultaneously, he was improving the nation's image of self as well as its global reputation. The continuation of the wars led many citizens to ask why, and here, Obama provided a series of answers to that very inquiry. What worked to his advantage was the subjective nature of ideographs, in that each person prescribes their own meanings to the abstracts, and as a result they are more likely to support the movement if their definition aligns with the President's, which in the case of protecting the <rule of law> and <democratic values>, it is difficult to disagree with him. This is one way in which he was able to successfully

generate support from the free nations of the world in his call for collective commitment and erase the line drawn between the Democrats and Republicans at home. By basing his rhetoric on universal ideals that make up the premise of the globe's modern understanding of <rule of law> and <democratic values>, there was very little room for opposition or disagreement regarding the necessity to combat <terrorist> advances.

### <Terrorism> as Necessity for Collective Commitment

Long has there been conflict and tension building across the globe regarding American measures of national security, both at home and abroad. One inarguable point is that the <rule of law> and the rest of our <democratic values> should and must be defended at all costs, and in order to be victorious in this campaign, President Obama was bestowed the task of rallying not only his own partisan House behind him, but also invoking the allegiances of the free nations of the world. Shortly following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, former President George W. Bush was the first leader of the free world to call for action on an international scale, by invoking NATO's Article 5, as discussed by President Obama (2009d): "An attack on one is an attack on all.' That is a promise for our time and for all time." His choice of pronouns is extremely unified in nature, using inclusive possessive words, portraying <terrorism> as a common enemy, and therefore, the act of fighting back against them as a common cause. Obama (2009d) stated that, "...the choices we make in the coming years will determine whether the future will be shaped by fear or by freedom, by poverty or by prosperity, by strife or by a just, secure, and lasting peace." He called upon emotions, images, and ideographs that the entirety of the free world is familiar with and closely connected to in order to rally them into action against a common enemy. Because Al Qaeda does not identify itself with any one country's government or national constitution, they have already isolated themselves from any potential allies to a certain degree. Obama's explanation of the necessity for collective commitment to secure these common values is based on safety in numbers. Obama emphasized the risk of countries acting independently, implying that they would fall to the agenda of <terrorism> if the nations of the world did not band together as one unit to battle this universal threat. Also, if he was successfully able to persuade NATO to act alongside or at least approve of his desired or selected course of action, Obama would have successfully justified, or at least excused, the United States occupation of the Middle East.

President Obama faces extremely similar challenges on the home front, having to cooperate and often compromise with one of the most partisan House systems the country has seen in its short life of two hundred years. Obama (2009k) recognized this, explaining that "Years of debate over Iraq and terrorism

have left our unity on national security issues in tatters and created a highly polarized and partisan backdrop for this effort." Here, Obama refused to trivialize the issue – the word "tatters", for example, insinuated the violent rhetoric put forth by both parties in their efforts to promote their campaign as to how the <War on Terror> should be handled. In order to bridge the gap between the two parties, President Obama, rather than cater to each individually, decided to forge a middle ground. He conjoined the morality of the Republican Party with the judicial perspective of the Democratic Party – making this an issue of good cop versus evil criminal, a hybridized version of the story. He accomplished this rhetorically by interweaving the two viewpoints: the basis of morality is religion, and the basis of justice is criminality, which are close enough in definition that Obama (2009l, see also 2009b and 2009g) was able to wield them almost synonymously:

Evil does exist in the world. A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince Al Qaida's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism; it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man, and the limits of reason.

This quotation portrays the two visions side by side, not only demonstrating their differences but highlighting their commonalities. He appealed to Republicans by applying pathos – the image of evil and the imperfections of man are rooted in moral understandings. On the other hand, Democrats were brought on board by logos, portrayed by the image of negotiation with a criminal in a hostage situation and alluding to the limits of reason. By juxtaposing these two ideological perspectives, Obama successfully adapted a rhetorical hybridism in order to appeal to both parties simultaneously.

The end result of unifying the Capital is a sense of <American exceptionalism>, a phenomenon socially and academically recognized in the postmodern era, which is the belief held by Americans that our historic reputation precedes us and that we of are greater importance simply because of our citizenship and legacy of overcoming adversity. Much like the life cycle of any living organism, the country itself has experienced major milestones that allow it to grow and mature and nurture its own world view based upon them. There is a certain, inherent type of high-order responsibility bestowed unto the nation as a result of this sensation. Some view this as a form of false authority, of vanity and self-absorption, yet Obama (2009c) qualified that "...pragmatism must serve a common purpose, a higher purpose. That's the legacy that we inherit. And that, in the end, is how government of the people, and by the people, and for the people, will endure in our time." Once

again, Obama provided motivation for the Republicans and the Democrats to work together towards a common goal: eradicating <terrorism> in the modern world. He invokes history, appeals to patriotism, and projects the focus upon protecting the people that the House is supposed to represent, serve, and ultimately, protect.

## Conclusion

Despite the difficult challenges of overcoming the damaging foreign policy rhetoric of the Bush Administration in a post-9/11 world, President Barack Obama successfully established his own unique rhetoric regarding the <War on Terror>. By juxtaposing <terrorism> to <democratic values>, specifically the <rule of law> in particular, Obama was able to convey a message that called for collective commitment on a global scale. He simultaneously bridged the split between the partisan two-party system, merging the Republican morality complex with the Democratic judicial perspective, reminding both the politicians and the people of the United States of America of their legacy of exceptionalism. President Barack Obama efficiently developed an ideology and successfully launched an ideographic campaign that established the groundwork for his next three years in office in dealing with foreign policy affairs.

Today, the <War on Terror> is considered over, but not yet done with. In order to understand what lies ahead, we must continue to look back into an exploration of President Obama's handlings of <terrorism> during its final years of legislative debate and how the ideograph is handled in the post-<War on Terror> era. From there, we can develop a contemporary and working understanding of how <terrorism> is evolving at this moment in politics, media, and foreign policy. This way, we will be able to comprehend the impact and efficacy of President Barack Obama's ideographic campaign, and be able to appreciate the rhetorical legacy that the next Commander-in-Chief will inherit.

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