With God on Our Side:
Religion in George W. Bush’s Foreign Policy Speeches

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Throughout history American presidents have employed religious imagery to communicate with the American people, especially in times of crisis. Although most presidents appeal to civil religion in public speeches, some commentators argue that George W. Bush’s religious rhetoric is more pronounced and more political than that of perhaps any modern president. Bush’s public speeches routinely weave theological principles with biblical references and religious images, eliciting praise from some corners and harsh criticism from others.

This paper reports preliminary findings from a study analyzing George W. Bush’s formal remarks on foreign policy and international issues in the months immediately preceding and following the events of September 11, examining his use of religious words, themes, and references. By conducting a careful content analysis of these speeches, we will address such questions as: How often and in what context does Bush reference religion in foreign policy speeches? What are the most common types of references? How does the use of religious imagery change following the events of September 11, 2001? What might be the effects of Bush’s use of religious imagery on foreign perceptions of the United States?

Before we consider these specific questions, we will place the study in the larger context of American political culture. After a brief discussion of civil religion and presidential speech, we will consider some of the public critiques of George W. Bush’s religious rhetoric. The next section of the paper explains our methodology and reports some results of the content analysis. After analyzing the data, we then turn to discussion, offering our preliminary assessment of the role and impact of Bush’s religious rhetoric.

George W. Bush and Religious Imagery: Critiques and Praises

The United States has never recognized a formal state church; nonetheless, a notion of civil religion infuses American politics. Describing civil religion as “the idea that a nation tries to understand its historical experience and national purpose in religious terms,” Kenneth Wald explains that “civil religion reflects an attempt by citizens to imbue their nation with a transcendent value. The nation is recognized as a secular institution, yet one that is somehow touched by the hand of God” (Wald 2003, 55). Analysis of public opinion data and consideration of religious political rhetoric over time suggests that most Americans embrace the concept of civil religion; many Americans do indeed view their country as both blessed by God and held responsible to a divine authority.

Although elements of civil religion abound in every sphere of American politics, some of the most prominent expressions of these themes appear in presidential rhetoric. Presidents routinely appeal to civil religion and reference divine power (see, e.g., Hart
presidents throughout history have incorporated biblical references into their public addresses (Waldman 2000). Furthermore, the American people seem to expect the president to profess a religious identity. To this point in history, every president has been affiliated with a church within the Christian tradition, all of them Protestant except John F. Kennedy.

**The Public Nature of Bush’s Faith**

Much evidence suggests that American presidents have customarily quoted the Bible and routinely evoke religious imagery in their speeches, so why has George W. Bush received criticism for his religious rhetoric? Are critics more concerned with the frequency or the content of Bush’s public religion?

Critiques of Bush’s religiosity often center on the public nature of his faith. In an article in the *Baptist Standard*, a periodical sent to Texan members of Southern Baptist churches, one commentator outlines concerns that Bush’s public speeches are too preachy. In her opinion, the problem lies less in the frequency of the president’s religious comments and more in the content of his religious expression: “Bush’s personal faith has turned highly public, arguably more so than any modern president. It’s not just that Bush is talking about God but that he’s talking about God differently” (Caldwell 2003). From this vantage point, Bush too readily conflates his personal faith with his role as president. His references to providence and divine planning suggest that he views God as a central actor in history and in politics.

Others note both the frequency of the president’s religious appeals and the apparent pervasiveness of religion in the administration. From the president’s personal story of faith transforming his life to the presence of so many evangelical Christians in key administration posts, the impact of Christianity seems broad and deep. In his examination of the impact of religion on George W. Bush, Fineman contends:

> [T]his president—this presidency—is the most resolutely ‘faith-based’ in modern times, an enterprise founded, supported and guided by trust in the temporal and spiritual power of God…But the Bush administration is dedicated to the idea that there is an answer to societal problems here and to terrorism abroad; give everyone, everywhere, the freedom to find God, too. (Fineman 2003)

According to this view, then, Bush’s religious perspective not only guides his policies but also defines his understanding of religion as a central means to political and social change.

Others decry themes in the president’s religious rhetoric that link government policy to divine providence. To his most vocal critics, both the language itself and the fervency with which it is delivered suggest a man on a mission from God who will not bow to reason or careful judgment. Written less than two weeks after the events of September 11, a polemic editorial in London’s *Observer* captures this sentiment well:

> Presumably the President’s Prayer, unlike the Lord’s, wastes no breath on forgiveness, but urges the faithful to bomb the hell out of those towel-heads,
amen! Coming in the wake of his talk about launching a ‘crusade,’ the President’s message was clear: God is on our side. Beware the infidel – i.e., anyone who does not subscribe to our belief in America the beautiful. (Odone 2001)

From this perspective, Bush is an arrogant leader who never admits mistakes and acts as if following divine command.

Still others express concern about what they view as Bush’s exclusivist language. The day after President Bush spoke at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, for example, the interdenominational group the Interfaith Alliance convened a press conference and issued a statement condemning Bush’s religious rhetoric. Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, the organization’s president, appeared with Princeton religion professor Elaine Pagels to voice their concerns about the exclusivity of Bush’s speech. Arguing that even Christians disagree on public policy, Gaddy opined: “It is not remotely within the realm of his executive duties to voice and advance particular sectarian priorities. Just as religious leaders must refrain from trying to dictate the political beliefs of their congregants, political leaders must disdain the misguided illusion that they speak as prophets of God’s will” (Interfaith Alliance, 2/13/03). For Gaddy and others who disagree with Bush’s policies, the president’s use of religious imagery can evoke a visceral reaction.

Perhaps no example demonstrates this perspective more than the use of the term “evil.” Categorizing policy in the language of “us” versus “them,” Bush quickly discovered the term “evil.” His former speechwriter David Frum explained the process:

The language of good and evil—central to the war on terrorism—came about naturally, said Frum. From the first, he said, the president used the term “evildoers” to describe the terrorists because some commentators were wondering aloud whether the United States in some way deserved the attack visited upon it on September 11, 2001. “He wanted to cut that off right way,” said Frum, “and make it clear that he saw absolutely no moral equivalence. So he reached right into the Psalms for that word.” (Fineman 2004)

The president’s close friend and spiritual mentor, Commerce Secretary Don Evans, also makes a direct connection between the term “evil” and Bush’s religious beliefs. As Evans explained in an interview, “belief gives [the president] something more than confidence. . . . It gives him a desire to serve others and a very clear sense of what is good and what is evil” (Fineman 2004).

*The View From Abroad*

Although many commentators within the United States have raised concerns about George W. Bush’s public religion, observers in other nations are even harsher in their criticism. Writing for the London *Independent*, Rupert Cornwell offers his analysis of Bush’s religiosity: 
Abroad, where America’s popularity is falling by the day, the risks are greater still. . . . Mr. Bush’s Christian fervour only confirms suspicions that the looming war with Iraq is indeed a ‘crusade’ against Muslims, exactly as Osama bin Laden suggests. For world-weary Europe the Presidential language evokes mirth and queasiness in equal measure. A European leader who spoke in such terms would be laughed off the stage. An American one who speaks this way only increases the fear that the simplicities of faith, and a habit of seeing a hideously complicated world in a black-and-white, good or evil fashion, are a recipe for disaster. (Cornwell 2003)

In European countries, where much smaller percentages of the population regularly attend religious services or claim the importance of religion in their lives, religiosity is more private and less common. Contemporary Europeans have less tolerance for overtly religious speechmaking, so Bush’s rhetoric makes many foreigners uneasy. Those in predominantly Muslim nations may react negatively as well. Although Bin Laden and other anti-American groups often use more explicit religious language than Bush, clips of the American president categorizing his enemies as evil and calling upon divine providence for protection and strength can play into the hands of terrorists calling for “holy war” against the United States. Such rhetoric from an American president reinforces the international perception of the United States as a “Christian nation.”

Responses to the Critics

Not all commentators condemn Bush’s use of religious imagery. Writing in the Weekly Standard, Fred Barnes considers Bush’s religious rhetoric and offers a more nuanced assessment. Barnes notes Bush’s careful phrasing to avoid exclusivist language and characterizes the president’s speech as reflective of the American mainstream:

While he readily invokes God, he carefully avoids mention of Jesus Christ, and he calls for tolerance of all faiths. His comments have been confined to four specific areas: comforting people in grief, citing faith’s ability to improve lives, commenting on the mysterious ways of providence, and mentioning God’s concern for humanity. (Barnes 2003)

Although a reasonable assessment of Bush’s most common use of religious themes, this characterization likely would not pacify many of the president’s critics who are less concerned with explicit references to Jesus Christ than they are with language that implies Bush views his actions as following God’s will. For example, Barnes’ catalog of Bush rhetoric does not mention the president’s use of the term “evil” and the implications of a battle between the forces of good and those of darkness. Although such terminology may not be exclusively religious, this language directly reflects the president’s Christian worldview and unsettles many of his critics.

An editorial in the evangelical monthly Christianity Today offers a strong rejoinder to those who object to Bush’s use of overtly religious language. Calling for “free speech for politicians,” the authors warn that “we will be a smaller society if we tell
everyone to leave their deepest convictions behind when they speak in the public square” (Christianity Today 5/27/2003). While defending the use of biblical language and imagery, the editorial considers the claims that Bush is attempting to implement his view of God’s will in his policy. Admitting that the combination of religion and politics is not always beneficial, the authors call for a different level of critical analysis: “Let’s move from wringing our hands that Bush or any politician has a religious worldview, and stick to debating whether the specific policies that emerge from that worldview actually bring peace and justice to the world” (Christianity Today 5/27/2003).

**Explanations for Bush’s Religious Rhetoric**

To what end does George W. Bush evoke such strong religious imagery and themes in his public speeches? What might he hope to accomplish with this strategy? Pundits and commentators offer various theories to explain why Bush discusses his faith so publicly.

Some observers argue that Bush uses religious language to appeal to his base of evangelical voters. Karl Rove, the president’s chief political strategist, readily admits that the turnout among evangelical voters in the 2000 election was disappointing. From his accounting, “there should have been 19 million of them, and instead there were 15 million of them. So 4 million of them did not turn out to vote” (Mooney 2003). Such voters clearly represent a central bloc of Bush’s base re-election constituency, a group he needs to keep energized for the 2004 race. To the extent that evangelical voters resonate with Bush’s religious rhetoric, such speechmaking should reinforce their support of the president and help his re-election bid. But not all voters—evangelical or otherwise—support the president and his use of religion. If the sole purpose of Bush’s religious speech is to reaffirm his Christian base, he could do so in a manner that would be less polarizing, more generic, and less open to criticism.

We do not presume to know the mind of George W. Bush, but ample evidence does suggest that his use of religious rhetoric, at least on some levels, flows out of his personal religious convictions. Opponents and supporters alike agree that the president appears to be a “true believer”; the two sides disagree, however, on the political implications of his faith perspective. Those who share his religious and political views may find strength in knowing the president is a man of committed faith; whereas, those who disagree with the president on religion or policy typically find his religiosity disconcerting.

Anecdotal remarks from on-the-record interviews with the president affirm the view that President Bush’s religious speech is, in large part, a reflection of his personal beliefs. A committed believer who is devoted to prayer, Bush readily admits his faith plays a role in his decision-making. In an interview with Bob Woodward, for example, the president explained his thought process concerning the War with Iraq, “I was praying for strength to do the Lord’s will. . .I’m surely not going to justify war based on God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible” (Thomas 2004). When asked if he sought advice from former President Bush, the younger Bush explained that “he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. . . There is a higher father that I appeal to” (Fineman and Lipper 2004).
George W. Bush and Religious Rhetoric: The Evidence

In order to examine President Bush’s use of religious rhetoric in foreign policy speeches, we retrieved and coded public addresses as catalogued on the White House news website. We collected speeches beginning with the President’s Inaugural Address on January 20, 2001, and continuing through March 11, 2002, the six-month anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center. The resulting sample includes Bush’s foreign policy rhetoric prior to the September 11 attacks on America, the initial days surrounding the attacks, and the six months following the attacks. We narrowed our sample to include only direct speeches by the president himself, thus excluding written statements released by the White House press secretary and remarks by Cabinet members acting as surrogates for the president's view. We collected and coded a total of 172 presidential speeches as part of this study.

Clarifying the Purpose: Conceptualizing the Study

In order to address our questions about President Bush’s use of religious rhetoric in foreign policy speeches, we need to conceptualize our study in a way that would allow us to assess the content of Bush’s public remarks so that we could infer the influence of antecedent (e.g., context) and consequent variables (e.g., foreign perception). Therefore, the study needs to focus on President Bush’s remarks across a wide range of dates, making note of the topics addressed, the context, and the rhetoric. Since we wanted to observe the effects of September 11, our data sample includes public remarks before and after this date.

Of the wide range of possible speeches by President Bush, we limited our analysis to his major policy speeches and all foreign policy addresses. Major speeches are classified as those in which the president covers a variety of policy issues in an address focused on informing both Congress and the American public of his goals and initiatives for the nation. Examples include the Inaugural Address and State of the Union. We identified foreign policy speeches by three key characteristics. First, we selected speeches in which the president specifically discussed a foreign policy issue such as those occasions when the president addressed issues such as Middle East peace, terrorism, or defense initiatives. Second, we included public remarks when the president appeared along with another foreign leader. This category includes events such as welcoming a prime minister to the White House, speeches from President Bush's trips to other nations, and his remarks about foreign trips upon returning home to the United States. Finally, we coded any speech addressed to the military or U.S. defense personnel.

The context of the communication is vital to explain any changes in rhetoric within this set of foreign policy speeches. Two types of relevant contextual issues seem noteworthy. First, the audience present for the remarks may affect Bush’s choice of words. Second, the delivery of the speech may change the nature of the language. For example, President Bush may talk about God more often when he is scripted versus when he is speaking impromptu.

Finally, our research needs to include an analysis of Bush’s rhetoric. To provide adequate responses to the questions we raised, we decided to code manifest and latent expressions as well as semantic relations between certain concepts. Manifest content
provides a measure of the occurrence and frequency of certain terms in order to observe exactly what Bush said and how many times he spoke a particular word or phrase. In contrast, latent content connects a word’s usage with a religious connotation, suggesting what people might infer from what Bush said. Lastly, the inclusion of semantic relations allows us to assess when religious terminology is meant to justify foreign policy, providing evidence for why Bush used certain expressions.

Given our concern with the occurrence of manifest and latent concepts in the President’s foreign policy rhetoric, the most appropriate method of investigation is content analysis. By utilizing this methodology, we can accomplish our research goals of codifying the context of remarks and frequency of religious expressions.

As defined by Shapiro and Markoff, content analysis refers to “any methodical measurement applied to text (or other symbolic material) for social science purposes” (Shapiro 1997, 14). This minimal delineation of content analysis allows for a range of measurements, texts, and purposes, which is fitting for the goals of our research.

*Applying the Method: Operationalizing Concepts*

Having selected the method of content analysis, the next step was to create a coding sheet that operationalized both the context and content of Bush’s religious rhetoric. The context included audience and delivery style; the content involved manifest, latent, and semantic concepts. We include a sample coding sheet in an appendix.

As we discovered, identifying the audience is not as simple as it may first seem. The president’s remarks are usually addressed to more than one group of people. Among the numerous possibilities, we categorized the following options: religious leaders, legislators, media, foreign leaders, military personnel, and the general public, leaving an open category to include any other audience. To distinguish between the most relevant audience and the more distant recipients of the president’s remarks, our coding sheet had two categories for the audience, direct and indirect. The direct audience we considered to be whichever group created the occasion for the remarks under consideration. For example, in a meeting with a President Vicente Fox, a foreign leader was the occasion for Bush’s public communication. Alternatively, the State of the Union Address has the general public as its most relevant audience, although foreign leaders no doubt listen as well.

We also coded the president’s delivery style for each speech. In broad terms, there are three categories for speech delivery: scripted, impromptu, and mixed. A scripted speech is one that the president and/or his team of speechwriters prepares and which he presents with written aid. Impromptu remarks, on the other hand, are unprepared responses to audience questions. It is relatively simple to distinguish these two categories. When the president answers journalists’ questions, the remarks are impromptu; when he talks uninterrupted before a passive audience, it is scripted. Any time a combination of these two delivery styles occurs, we coded the remarks mixed.

To examine the rhetorical content of the speeches, we coded manifest, latent, and semantic aspects of the president’s public remarks. For this reason, the coding sheet has two distinct portions, one dedicated to manifest concepts and the other to latent ones. For both sections, we pre-specified some likely religious concepts and left open categories for any unpredicted instances. Manifest terms included God, direct biblical quotations,
Satan, evil, prayer, Islam, and faith. God would include any explicit mention by an alternate name (e.g., the Lord). To be a manifest biblical quotation, we required a mention of the chapter so that these could not be confused with implicit references. We also coded use of the term “faith,” dividing the coding into two possible connotations: one religious (I have faith in God), and one secular (I have faith in the military). Wanting to measure implicit religious references in addition to explicit words and phrases, we coded three types of latent content: Biblical quotations (when the president did not cite the reference), implicit mentions of the divine, and religious concepts.

In a final step, we coded the context in which the president referenced religious ideas to examine the semantic relations of his rhetoric. We noted every time President Bush used a given term and also coded when the religious terms occurred as part of a reference to action on the part of the United States, mentioned the United States in a positive or negative tone, or mentioned non-Americans in positive or negative tones. Coding for context, for example, enables distinctions between a positive reference to Muslims in the United States, comments praising Islam overseas, or a derogatory remark about Islam.

Findings

President Bush’s use of religious rhetoric clearly changes following the events of September 11. Figures 1 and 2 track his usage of overt religious terms in foreign policy speeches each week, measuring the number of speeches with manifest religious content and the number of religious words per speech. The data reveal a pattern of the president making occasional religious references in his early foreign policy speeches. In many of these speeches, the only manifest content is a sign-off phrase such as “God bless America.” The two speeches in the early period with the most specific religious content were the Inaugural Address and a Memorial Day speech.

Immediately following the events of September 11, however, the president’s rhetoric took a sharp turn. From September through early November, every foreign policy speech included at least five or more direct religious words and phrases. By the middle of November 2001, the number of religious references began to decrease but stabilized at levels greater than in the months preceding the terrorist attacks. Bush delivered three times as many speeches with overt religious phrases in the six months following September 11 than in the eight months he served in office before.

Although comparisons of raw numbers of speeches provide a good overview of the relative frequency of religious remarks, percentages provide other important information. Figure 3 plots a ratio to show how many of Bush’s foreign policy speeches in a given week include direct references to religious phrases. In his first eight months in office, Bush directly referenced religion in some but not most of his foreign policy speeches. In 16 of the 26 weeks that Bush spoke about foreign policy before September 11, less than half the speeches included a direct use of a religious term. In contrast, in the months following the terrorist attacks, Bush made direct religious references in every...
policy speech he delivered for 13 different weeks and in at least half of the foreign policy speeches delivered for 22 of the 27 weeks we coded speeches.

[Figure 3 about here]

*Changing Times, Changing Rhetoric*

Just as the general trend data show an increase in Bush’s use of overt religious language following the events of September 11, so does our analysis reveal a shift in the rhetorical content of Bush’s speech. Bush’s Address to the Nation delivered on September 11, 2001, for example, is replete with powerful and frequent religious references, as in the following excerpt:

> Tonight, I ask for your prayers for all of those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

In this speech and many others in the fall of 2001, Bush repeated religious themes, finding new words and phrases to adapt to the new national mood.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the president learned to choose his religious rhetoric carefully. Consider the Sunday after the attacks, when Bush offered prepared remarks from the South Lawn after arriving back at the White House. He departed from his script to answer questions from reporters, explaining, “This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.” International reaction to the description of the war as a crusade was quick and virulent. Although he may have intended the term as a generic description of the campaign, the court of public opinion made the connection to the Crusades. After this much-criticized off-hand remark, Bush never again used the term crusade in a foreign policy speech.

While Bush avoided the term “crusade,” usage of other words with religious connotation increased once the war on terrorism began. Consider, for example, references to two specific terms, “evil” and “Islam.”

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Bush’s use of the term “evil,” pulled from Psalm 27 in the wake of the attacks, has a specific religious connotation. Our results show a dramatic rise in Bush’s use of “evil” in September 2001 and the months following. Figure 4 displays the frequency of President Bush’s references to “evil” in foreign policy speeches each week. Between his inauguration and the September 11 attacks, President Bush only referenced the term evil on two occasions. First, while speaking at the dedication of the National D-Day Memorial on June 6, 2001, he uses the term in relation to the events of World War II:

> Fifty-seven years ago today, America and the nations of Europe formed a bond that has never been broken. And all of us incurred a debt that can never be repaid. Today, as America dedicates our D-Day Memorial, we pray that our country will
always be worthy of the courage that delivered us from evil, and saved the free world.

The second time the president uses the term "evil" before September 11 was during his remarks with Pope John Paul II on July 23. As with his use of it at the memorial dedication, he again used the term in reference to war, this time discussing the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain: "Since October of 1978, you have shown the world not only the splendor of truth, but also the power of truth to overcome evil and to redirect the course of history. You have urged men and women of goodwill to take to their knees before God, and to stand unafraid before tyrants. And this has added greatly to the momentum of freedom in our time."

While the president only used the word "evil" two times before the attacks, the frequency changed dramatically following the attacks. From September 2001 through March 2002, Bush referenced “evil” a total of 199 times in his foreign policy speeches. He first uses the term on the evening of September 11 in the opening paragraph of his Address to the Nation:

Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbors. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

He continued to use the term on three additional occasions that week and a total of 18 times the following week.

The president referenced evil the most during the week of October 7, when he began to detail America’s planned response to the attacks in. During this week he held a prime time news conference and made 12 direct references to evil, often describing the War on Terror as a fight of good versus evil. For example, on November 2, he responded to a reporter’s question, saying: "… I don't accept the excuse that poverty promotes evil. That's like saying poor people are evil people. I disagree with that. Osama Bin Laden is an evil man. His heart has been so corrupted that he’s willing to take innocent life. And we are fighting evil, and we will continue to fight evil, and we will not stop until we defeat evil."

The president also began to mention Islam after the attacks. The results displayed in Figure 5 show the number of references to Islam per week. President Bush did not directly mention Islam or Muslims before September 11, but in the six months afterwards he mentioned the religion 92 times. Islam appeared 28 times in the speeches during the week following the attacks. In almost all references, his tone was positive, explaining how Islam is a peaceful religion and America is not fighting against it. However, on five
occasions, Bush referenced Islam in a negative context. For example, on September 20 he states:

The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics -- a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists’ directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children.

In each of the instances where Bush mentioned Islam negatively, however, he made clear distinctions between fringe groups he says corrupt Islam and mainstream Muslims whom he promoted as advocates of a peaceful religion.

George W. Bush and Religious Imagery: Possible Implications

Having discussed some of the preliminary findings of our research, we now turn to a consideration of some of the possible implications of Bush’s “holy war rhetoric.” Clearly, audiences will vary in their impressions of and agreement with Bush’s use of religious imagery, and many will view the president through the lens of their own experiences with religion and people of faith. Those with strongly held religious beliefs who are steeped in the Christian tradition, for example, will be more likely than their more secular counterparts to recognize biblical allusions and more subtle references to hymns and other forms of Christian symbolism. In contrast, those with negative associations with religion and religious people may have a heightened sensitivity to phrasings and tones that feel “preachy.” Recognizing that individual responses to the president’s words will vary widely, we can nevertheless note some potential impacts of religious speech.

Results of a recent poll conducted for beliefnet.com illustrate the variance in popular reaction to President Bush. More than half of those surveyed said that they like Bush’s moral clarity and see this as a sign of good leadership. On the other hand, almost three of ten respondents criticized the president for talking about religion too much (Zahn 2003). Bush’s moral certitude clearly affects people in different ways: his clarity and steadfast focus appeal to his base supporters but ostracize his most ardent opponents. Because Bush speaks and acts with an air of moral certitude that may reflect his religious convictions, such a posture leaves little room for deliberation and possible policy shifts. If indeed he believes a course of action is in accordance with God’s will, it follows he would not want to re-examine the decision-making process.

Bush’s use of religious rhetoric may also contribute to foreign backlash in several important ways. First, it can harm diplomatic efforts. What plays well with many audiences at home may not resonate as clearly or effectively overseas. What many Americans will view as a hallmark of leadership, others may find offensive. One commentator, writing in the New Statesman, derides what he views as triumphalism in Bush’s rhetoric and draws the following conclusion: “what is clear is that Europeans, steeped in their faith much longer than Americans, deeply resent Bush invoking God as America’s policeman of the world—with Bush and Rumsfeld and [company] chosen by God to have absolute infallibility in all judgments” (Stephen 2003). Such commentary
clearly relies on hyperbole to make a rhetorical point, but the underlying message is clear: Bush’s references to God evoke scorn in some circles, particularly overseas. Such negative responses suggest that, especially in areas of international relations that rely upon cooperation of other nations, a heightened sensitivity to the impact of religious rhetoric would be wise.

Bush’s religious speech may also have the unwelcome effect of increasing the risk of terrorism against the United States and its allies. Those who view the United States as a Christian nation and desire holy war against this “great Satan” will use, and even twist, the president’s words to further their goals. As noted in our analysis above, President Bush consistently reiterates the theme that his nation is not at war with Islam and that he respects Islam as a religion of peace. Even so, repeated positive references to Islam may not be sufficient to persuade every audience, and mentions of Islamic terrorists as evildoers may mitigate against the positive portrayals of Islam as a whole. Furthermore, the language of good against evil, can, in and of itself, create backlash. As former Ambassador Robert Seiple warns, “demonization can produce hatred, and all of sudden, we’re heading toward a battle of civilizations” (Lampman 2003). Although the use of the term evil makes a powerful rhetorical point, it may fuel the fires of opposition to the United States.

In addition to the possible implications listed above, the results of our analysis also raise significant questions about how and in what manner presidents should publicly profess their faith. To what extent should a politician temper rhetoric in order to appease potential critics, and how might this compromise the ability to stand on principles, speaking honestly without fear of man? How do presidents negotiate these complex political and ethical waters? These questions and other suggest a need for a broader conversation about George W. Bush and his use of religious rhetoric.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The data reported above represent only preliminary findings from a research project still in progress. We have by no means exhausted our dataset at this point; clearly we need to broaden our analysis of the existing speeches to learn more about the context in which Bush makes his remarks, the effect of audience factors, and other intervening variables.

In future research we hope to expand the database to include foreign policy speeches over a longer span of time. The current sample provides an interesting frame for comparing rhetoric before and in the months after the events of September 11. Expanding the database would allow us to see how President Bush’s speeches change over time as the war on terror expands to include the invasion of Iraq. To what extent does Bush use religious rhetoric in the months building toward the Iraq war? Do his speeches during the hostilities evoke more or fewer religious themes than in previous stages of his foreign policy?

Although this analysis is just a beginning step of an exploration of the political impact of Bush’s religious rhetoric, the data reveal that President Bush’s rhetorical forcefulness, religious tone, and word choice took a dramatic turn in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. Religious words and images have the power to unify and the power to polarize, so further research can help us understand more about both Bush’s use of religious rhetoric and its political significance.
## Appendix: Coding Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>ID No.:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>No. Lines:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject(s):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Delivery:** Circle one of the following: 2 = Scripted 1 = Impromptu 0 = Mixed

**Audience:** Write manually in space to the below, then record corresponding numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct:</th>
<th>Code:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 = General Public</td>
<td>4 = Foreign Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Military</td>
<td>3 = Media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indirect:</th>
<th>Code:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 = Legislators</td>
<td>0 = Other (Specify Above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = Religious Leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rhetorical Analysis:** Tally and total the data for each of the following.

### Explicit Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God, etc.</th>
<th>Biblical Quotes</th>
<th>Satan, etc.</th>
<th>Evil</th>
<th>Prayer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ref. U.S. Action | |
|------------------||
| U.S. (+) | |
| U.S. (-) | |
| Others (+) | |
| Others (-) | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islam, etc.</th>
<th>Faith: Religious</th>
<th>Faith: Secular</th>
<th>Other:</th>
<th>Other:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Ref. U.S. Action | |
|------------------||
| U.S. (+) | |
| U.S. (-) | |
| Others (+) | |
| Others (-) | |

### Implicit Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biblical Reference</th>
<th>Divinity</th>
<th>Religious Concept</th>
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<p>| Ref. U.S. Action | |
|------------------||
| U.S. (+) | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. (-)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (-)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


"Free Speech for Politicians: God-Talk in the Public Square is Healthy." *Christianity Today*, May 2003, 30.


