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“Freedom’s Price” and “Freedom’s Power”: President Bush’s Rhetorical Assault on the Concept of Freedom and the Justification of a Surveillance State

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Abstract

In his essay "Politics and the English Language," as well as the novel 1984, George Orwell presents the ease with which language and propaganda can be used to justify atrocity. The Orwellian perspective of language exposes the ambiguous and "meaningless words" infesting the rhetoric following the terrorist attacks of September the 11th. While the rhetoric encouraging the invasion of Iraq has been justly scrutinized, there is a suspicious lack of focus on another crucial result of September the 11th. Douglass Kellner, cultural theorist and author of *Bushspeak* and the *Politics of Lying*, neglects to properly acknowledge the institution and effects of the United States Patriot Act. Kellner meticulously dissects what he deems "Bushspeak" in support of the war in Iraq, but regrettably ignores the perversion of the ideal of freedom on the domestic front. By thoroughly deconstructing George Bush's rhetoric, in keeping with Orwell's critique of political language, I find that politicians unleashed freedom against itself in an effort to restrict civil rights.

Keywords: Orwell, George Bush, The Patriot Act, Freedom, Counterterrorism, Black Identity
Extremism

On September 11th, 2001, two planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York. The country went into a state of mourning after the attacks, and many feared a second attack was imminent. The Bush Administration capitalized on these growing fears and vastly expanded the intelligence capabilities of government organizations like the FBI. The administration orchestrated this through the United States Patriot Act, which was passed only forty-five days after the attacks on the twin towers. While some harbored concerns about the broad powers contained within this legislation, there was only a single vote against it in the Senate (Rothschild 32). Before we can come to an understanding of the rhetorical methods through which the Bush administration muscled these new powers through court, it is important to establish a lens through which to examine them.

George Orwell, most well-known for his dystopian novel 1984, was vocal about what he saw as the deterioration of the English language. In the essay “Politics and the English Language,” published in 1946, Orwell condemned his contemporaries for their shortcomings by highlighting instances of their rhetorical failures. Orwell’s frustration with the use of English in his time took many forms, but his biggest criticism was with the use of the language in political writing. He believed that “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible... Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begin, and sheer cloudy vagueness” (Orwell 132). This notion was central to the development of my research and served as a lens through which to examine political rhetoric. Orwell served in the Spanish civil war, and witnessed rhetorical masterminds, like Joseph Goebbels, manipulate language to further totalitarian agendas. His personal experiences with propaganda, coupled with

a strong body of anti-totalitarian work, make the Orwellian perspective helpful in understanding the Bush administrations manipulation of freedom.

Orwell highlights five fatal flaws within the political language of his time, but his condemnation of “meaningless words” lends itself most to an analysis of modern political speech. He provides numerous examples of these meaningless words but defines them as terms which “are completely lacking in meaning” (Orwell 132). He makes this idea clear by using the word “democracy” to highlight the meaninglessness found in political language. Orwell wrote: “It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning” (Orwell 132). The word “democracy” is simply an empty shell ready to be stuffed with meaning to defend one’s beliefs. Instead of relying upon concrete definition, politicians utilize words with positive connotations to support their arguments while ignoring the actual meaning of said words. Orwell believes that those who champion freedom and democracy prevent definition of these terms for fear they will no longer serve as rhetorical shields. One only must turn on the news to see that Orwell’s “meaningless words” are still in frequent use seventy years after his essay. President Bush’s rhetoric is reliant on these phrases, like his use of the word “evil” five times in his first statement on the attacks of 9/11 (Kellner 624).

Cultural theorist and Professor Douglass Kellner also examined President Bush’s rhetoric in the context of Orwell in the essay “Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying.” In his detailed dissection of Bush’s rhetoric, Kellner highlights the President’s reliance on “a systematic politics of mass deception based on lies” (Kellner 623) to further his foreign and domestic agenda. Throughout his essay, Kellner defines the patterns that constitute what he dubs

“Bushspeak” specifically focusing on the invasion of Iraq. While Kellner expertly reveals the manipulative aspects of so-called “Bushspeak,” his narrow focus on the invasion of Iraq leaves the domestic impact of Bush’s rhetoric out of the conversation.

The USA Patriot Act, mentioned only in passing by Kellner, expanded the intelligence capabilities of the U.S government. It gave the FBI access to National Security Letters (NSL’s) which allowed them to request information on potential terrorist suspects from third parties. These warrantless requests for information were protected by lifelong gag orders that prevent recipients from ever speaking about the NSL even with a lawyer (Gorham-Oscilowski 626). Although direct references to surveillance are suspiciously lacking in the Bush canon, much of the rhetoric supporting the invasion of Iraq simultaneously served to push domestic surveillance as vital to combat terrorism. This language led to the rushed passage of this legislation, lack of scrutiny by the public, and the broad powers afforded to the FBI. By thoroughly deconstructing George Bush’s rhetoric, in keeping with Orwell’s critique of political language, I find that Bush unleashed freedom against itself to restrict civil rights.

President Bush served two terms, and one would find language like his post 9/11 rhetoric in many of the speeches throughout his eight-year presidency. Narrowing the scope of this investigation to the forty-five-day period leading up to the Patriot Act gives the clearest picture of this kind of rhetoric’s impact on surveillance policy around the world. I focused on two speeches given in that time span, one nine days after 9/11 given directly to the public and another after the signing of the Patriot Act. In the first speech, Bush attempts to reveal the intentions of this new terrorist threat and to simultaneously detail the U.S response to their aggression. It is ironic that, in an apparent attempt to provide clarity to the terrified American public, Bush obfuscates both subjects and oversimplifies the coming conflict.

This effort is captured in this quote from the speech given nine days after 9/11 “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done” (Bush, September 2001). In the first sentence of this quote, Bush issues a call to the defense of freedom. While defending freedom sounds righteous at first glance, it is difficult to clarify the scope of that defensive effort. The Oxford English Dictionary provides numerous definitions of the words “free” and “freedom,” which range from liberation from slavery to total escape from the will of others. By claiming that he intends to fight for freedom, Bush establishes a broad purpose with which to justify his actions. Dictators and totalitarians have historically abused concepts like freedom to further their agendas, which makes this rhetoric less surprising, but Bush’s manipulation of language is unique in its result. The broad powers afforded to the government by the Patriot Act, which was achievable in large part due to Bush, were unheard of.

The second sentence is an example of Orwell’s belief that modern language “consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else and making the results presentable by sheer humbug” (Orwell 134). Again, Bush’s call to “bring justice to our enemies” appears rational and democratic in that wrongdoers should be punished for their crimes. The complication here is that most of the sentence is devoid of meaning. There is no distinction between the phrases “Bring our enemies to justice,” “Bring justice to our enemies” and “Justice will be done.” Bush repeats the same phrase in three forms and amalgamates them into a passable, seemingly just call to action. Orwell believed this kind of language turned otherwise simple statements into convoluted phrases meant to “give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements” (Orwell 131). The President justifies his actions

against terrorism, both at home and abroad, by portraying himself as a paragon of freedom and justice through what Orwell would call “pretentious diction.”

Moving forward a month into the future, October 26th, 2001 to be exact, the Patriot Act is signed into law. The previous speech demonstrated Bush’s intent to establish broad, unrestricted goals for this conflict and defenses for his actions. In this speech, he obfuscates the motives and justifications of his enemies with the quote “We are not fighting a nation, we are not fighting a religion, we’re fighting evil and we have no choice but to prevail. We are fighting people that hate our values, they cannot stand what America stands for, and they really do not like the fact that we exist” (Bush, October 2001). He begins by portraying those responsible for 9/11, and those with any connection to them, as the embodiment of pure evil, independent of nation or ideology. While the actions of these terrorists are unequivocally wrong and should be condemned, Bush’s representation of them is dangerously oversimplified. The people responsible for these attacks have their own values, beliefs, and families. Each of them has a reason for their actions, and it is important for us to understand them to prevent others from following in their footsteps as many have.

Throughout this speech, Bush emphasizes the threat that terrorism poses on the home front rather than the dangers facing innocents in the conflict abroad. Although it was clear that the terrorists responsible for 9/11 came from the Middle East, Bush’s separation of terrorism from a nation without any clarification on the epicenter of this movement feeds into the nations fear of a second attack. If the fight is not concentrated in one area, the war on terror could take place in the average American’s backyard. Bush relies upon the motif of a “two-front war” in several instances during his speech. He alludes to the bombing of Pearl Harbor by remarking that “Americans have known wars -- but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on soil, except

for one Sunday in 1941” (Bush, October 2001). World War II was one of the largest conflicts in history, and Bush’s evocation forces the listener to recall the global chaos and atrocity that occurred during that conflict. Terrorists posed a significant threat, but this underhanded tactic deepens the public’s fears by comparing it to a fundamentally different conflict. Kellner touches on this idea in his essay when he says that “Exploiting fear thus was a major tactic to push through his radical shift in foreign policy, as well as his right-wing domestic agenda (Kellner 633). Instead of reassuring the American public with concrete information, Bush casts into doubt the nature of the enemy, his own goals, and the scope of the coming war through abstraction and metaphor.

President Bush does not create this issue of uncertainty without presenting a solution. The Bush Administration’s rhetoric buried their new enemy in obscurity and provided an excuse to give the government every tool necessary to root that enemy out. On the day of the Patriot Act signing, Bush stated “We’ve gotta know more about the enemy, Where they try to hide, where they may try to strike next, and so we have a great cooperation with intelligence from around the world as well as cooperation internally” (Bush, October 2001). Bush abstracted the nature and threat of his enemy to justify the government’s expansion of powers, and his rhetoric brought the conflict even closer to home to support the use of those powers domestically.

The Bush Administration’s support of the Patriot Act benefited from a larger effort to frame the war on terror as a conflict between good and evil. They took several angles in trying to justify this Manichean portrayal of the conflict. At one point, Bush referred to the war on terror as a crusade, but quickly dropped the use of that allusion because of its ties to the widespread killing of countless Muslims. He also relied on “cowboy” imagery, calling for Osama Bin Laden to be captured “dead or alive” and making references to old west style wanted posters (Brewer

235-236). Tactics like this draw on a long history of wartime propaganda ranging from World War I to the Korean War. The propaganda campaigns often broke down conflicts into a fight between good and evil, civilization and savagery, as we see in Bush's framing of the war on terror.

I will not deny that domestic surveillance does make it easier to catch terrorists. If the government knows where and when terrorists will strike, they can prevent another tragedy like that of September the 11th. Surveillance, however, comes with a price. The Patriot Act comes with a few restrictions, including the need for investigations utilizing those powers provided by the act to pertain to terrorism. This sounds like a strong check in theory, but the government has already used Bush's style of abstraction to get around it. Take for example the report issued by the FBI in August of 2017 titled "Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers." In this report, the FBI links several unrelated attacks on law enforcement officials and establishes Black Identity Extremism as a domestic terror threat (Saito 1-2). Rakem Balogun, founder of black activist group Guerilla Mainframe, was internally labeled as a potential Black Identity Extremist, and was subsequently monitored by the FBI. He spent five months in jail on weapons charges but was cleared of all charges (Saito 3). The creation of this label pushed contemporary black activists into the scope of domestic terror detailed in the Patriot Act, and the FBI took advantage of the mechanisms set in motion by Bush in both a rhetorical sense and a legal one.

It's important to establish that the Bush administration was not the origin of domestic surveillance, but rather are a part of a long tradition of covert surveillance of "subversive" groups in the U.S. J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO targeted communist organizations, Puerto Rican nationalists, the American Indian Movement, the Ku Klux Klan, and what the FBI called "Black

Nationalist Hate Groups” (Hoerl and Ortiz 594-95). The name applied to black activist groups is eerily similar to the “Black Identity Extremist” label used by modern government agencies. This program drew wide criticism for its targeting of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X. The similarities between COINTELPRO and the surveillance of Black Identity Extremists is clear, and they illustrate that the surveillance of minorities is nothing new in America.

As the President of the U.S, Bush’s rhetoric did not occur in a vacuum and it is important to look at the global impact of the Patriot Act. Terrorism is a global issue, and that means that countries across the world must figure out how to deal with it. Examining the similarities between the tactics and rhetoric used by China to support its counterterrorism efforts shows how wide-ranging rhetoric like that of the Bush administration is. China’s surveillance tactics range from advanced data collection, to a police presence on every street corner. These tactics disproportionately effect the Uighur Muslim ethnic minority, and many of them are specifically designed to monitor Uighurs. Domestic surveillance can lead Uighurs who express aspects of their religion, like prayer, to be forced into what the government calls “education placements” (ICFT 20). This phrase alone reflects Orwell’s belief that “Political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible... Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism” (Orwell 132).

China co-opted America’s war on terror in the wake of 9/11 to justify extreme measures for the suppression of civil rights. These measures have gone so far as to classify basic expressions of religious freedom, like the act of fasting during the sacred Muslim holiday Ramadan, as domestic terrorism. Senior officials within the European Union believed that China’s classification of what constitutes “terrorism” was “sufficiently ambiguous to be

interpreted in whatever manner suits state objectives” (ICFT 48). Despite the temporal distance between now and the passage of the Patriot Act, civil freedoms across the globe are under threat because of language similar to that used by the Bush administration.

Despite his fears, Orwell was not a pessimist when it came to the future of the English language. He detailed several steps that people, especially writers and politicians, had to take in order to rid the English language of dangerous euphemisms and abstractions (Orwell 139). These steps, while seemingly basic, would eliminate some of the confusion in political writing but only if people choose to do so. There is an obvious value in using euphemism, abstraction, and misdirection in political language. President Bush’s rhetoric was so effective that it fundamentally changed the meaning of freedom, so much so that the revision of the Patriot Act in 2015 was called the Freedom Act. Despite the hollowness within the rhetoric used by fear-mongers like President Bush and his administration, global citizens must criticize this language in order to prevent potentially devastating decisions from being made without any challenge as was the case in the Patriot Act.

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