

A Forensic Anatomy of the Strategy for “Victory”

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | December 21, 2005

The MO—method of operation or, more formally, *modus operandi*—is clear from even the most cursory look at the externals. Put Commander-in-Chief George Bush in front of an audience that is sure to be friendly (like military cadets), test the themes, wait for the inevitable applause, and depart right after the speech. Progressively move on to fora less hand-picked but sure to contain a number of individuals sympathetic to the White House line. Above all, sound resolute (like Churchill), stand tall, and be assured that there’s no such thing as too much repetition.

- November 30, U.S. Naval Academy. 43 minutes. No questions.
- December 7, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC. 34 minutes. No questions.
- December 12, Philadelphia World Affairs Council. 58 minutes including questions and answers for about 20 minutes.
- December 13, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC. 31 minutes. No questions.
- December 18, Oval Office Address to the Nation, 18 minutes. No questions.
- December 19, White House Press Conference, 58 minutes.

Two leading newspapers compared the first four speeches for identical words and phrases. Adding an analysis of the Oval Office speech identifying the same or equivalent language gives the following:

- leaving Iraq to terrorists won’t occur “on my watch”: 127 times
- freedom or the “spread of freedom”: 107 times
- Congress had the same intelligence: 102 times
- democracy: 90 times
- security: 80 times
- victory: 46 times
- world’s dangerous men with dangerous weapons: 21 times

- free nations are peaceful: 19 times
- Saddam spurned the world’s “just demands”: 15 times

Perhaps we in whose name politicians speak and act have become so inured to “political spin” that we discount the meaning and ramifications of such words when we do not ignore these speeches altogether. Yet we do so at our own peril, especially when, over the course of six major speeches in 20 days, there is so much repetition. It suggests that the policies, priorities, and programs espoused by the nation’s leadership are disconnected from the priorities of a significant plurality, if not a majority, of the public—and their wager that if they just bombard the public with the same refrain, they can redirect opinion to their advantage. Alternatively (or perhaps additionally), it may betray a dearth of new ideas on the way forward on central issues and reducing the spinmeisters to substituting catch-phrases for fresh approaches.

Iraq in Myth and Reality

Indeed, the warfare in Iraq is absolutely the central focus of the Bush administration and its “war on terror,” as evidenced by the insistent and repetitious presidential declarations that “Iraq is the central front” of terror’s “war on humanity” and freedom’s reciprocal “war on terror.” Bush must cast 9/11 in mythic terms because he sees himself and his place in history as one of the “great men” chosen by fate or providence to lead when humanity faced catastrophe. To concede that al-Qaida struck the U.S. because



Osama bin Laden was offended by the continued presence of infidel soldiers in the land of Islam's two holiest cities reduces the challenge to comprehensible dimensions. The war in Afghanistan comes into focus as a punitive expedition undertaken to topple a regime that would not surrender those accused of planning the 9/11 attack. Similarly, despite the multiple "justifications" for the U.S.-led invasion, the Iraq war and occupation reflect the convergence of (1) a tyrannical regime with no friend or "champion" (2) whose leader earlier had run afoul of the U.S. (3) where a new administration felt that Iraq was "unfinished business." Considering—properly—Afghanistan and Iraq in their political-diplomatic dimension also spotlights the administration's drive to elevate and ennoble the "war on terror" to global (hence mythic) proportions (e.g., unprovoked, al-Qaida attacked on 9/11 because it hates U.S. freedoms; after all, on 9/11 no U.S. troops were in either Afghanistan or Iraq).

Another of George Bush's recurring themes is "A clear strategy begins with a clear understanding of the enemy we face." But, his "clear understanding" shifts and changes depending on the status of coalition forces in Iraq. Originally termed "insurgents" or "foreign jihadists" but never "resistance fighters," the enemy in Iraq evolved into Bush's or Rumsfeld's rejectionists (nationalists), Saddamists, and terrorists.

Equally significant for U.S. strategy is understanding the motivations of those it is fighting. Bush asserts that the rejectionists are miffed because they lost their privileged position. That is accurate as far as it goes. But looking just a little further, we see that what rejectionists seem to fear more is that their rights in the new Iraq cannot and will not be protected under the constitution as currently drawn. (By comparison, the U.S. constitution protects minorities in part by creating a Senate where each state is equally represented no matter how large or populous.)

Bush is betting the future of Iraq on the four-month period following the installation of a "permanent" Iraqi government, during which the constitution can be revised to strengthen and "protect minority rights." But here—as with the White House selective emphasis of intelligence in the run-up to war—Bush omits a key caveat that appears in the 35-page

"National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" elaboration of the administration's strategy. The document says rejectionists are persuadable "*provided that* the federal government protects minority rights." Under the new constitution, the central government is so weak it may very well be unable to safeguard any rights.

Meanwhile, according to Bush, Saddamists are simply hungry for the bad old days, and the terrorists seek to drive the U.S. from the region, make Iraq a base for international terror against moderate regimes, re-establish the 7th century Islamic caliphate, and eventually conquer or kill all non-believers.

Defining Victory

Also consistent across the administration's presentations is an insistence that "Our strategy in Iraq has three elements ... political ... security ... economic." What changed from the pre-war and early post-invasion periods is how each of these elements would be constituted. The Iraqis rejected the original U.S. timetable for reconstituting Iraq's political structure and sovereignty. Pre-war, the administration said Iraqi oil would fund much of the cost of rebuilding the economy. However, now output remains below pre-war levels because of the poor state of the industry's infrastructure, lack of security, and reluctance of outside investors to pour money into what might be a black hole rather than black gold. And, where once no Baathists would be allowed in the new army, Iraqis are now openly encouraging senior and mid-level officers to apply for positions.

At this point, in one way or another, the speeches introduce criteria for "victory" and "mission accomplished" and "redeployment" of coalition forces. There is the pledge that "as the Iraqi security forces stand up, coalition forces can stand down. And when our mission of defeating the terrorists in Iraq is complete, our troops will return home."

In itself, this statement proposes two not necessarily simultaneous conditions: trained Iraqi units able to operate on their own or without "major" coalition support, and defeating the terrorists in Iraq.

Then Bush also affirms that “we will never accept anything less than complete victory.” But the “we,” significantly, is the U.S. administration, not the Iraqis. This is clear from another assertion running through the addresses: “We will stay as long as necessary to complete the mission.”

And how will we know when the mission is complete and victory is achieved? “Victory will come when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq’s democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can provide for the safety of their own citizens, and when Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists to plot new attacks on our nation.”

The President flatly refuses to entertain the proposition that the very presence of foreign—that is, U.S.—military forces in Iraq contributes to the mayhem by providing an accessible target for terrorists who, precisely because of the carnage, are able to make common cause with those who simply want their country back. Thus, the U.S. military presence, by diverting the talents of these anti-foreign occupation Iraqis to fighting the U.S.-led occupiers, has undoubtedly undercut the development of cross-ethnic and cross-sectarian trust that are indispensable for the formation of national symbols and institutions that can command the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of Iraqis.

Should this critique of the Bush strategy for victory be anywhere in the ballpark, rapid redeployment of coalition troops to their home countries would serve as an integrating mechanism for Iraq and for the

emergence of an Iraqi government adapted to the culture, history, and mores of Iraqis.

In his address to the nation December 18, the president, declaring that “now there are only two options before our country: victory or defeat,” urged the nation “not to give up on this fight for freedom.” Yet the choice (or some intermediate hybrid) is not ours to make. The outcome in Iraq will ultimately rest on the abilities and fortitude of Iraqis, not on U.S. arms. In effect, the President has mortgaged the nation’s security to Iraqi “success.” And our Congress has succumbed to the president’s “either/or” logical fallacy, allowing Americans no choice but to do what the president decides.

The irony of this whole Iraq adventure is that in ostensibly endowing Iraqis with freedom, the freedoms of Americans have been curtailed with no indication of when—if ever—they will be restored. Unless the public presses for the full restoration of the freedoms abridged by the unconstitutional presidential proclamation of “war,” those who follow us will live in a more rigid and autocratic society.

If so, perhaps in 100 or so years, Iraqis will be willing to “liberate” North Americans.

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