

From Axis of Evil to a New Beginning: Discourses of Bush and Obama¹

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Abstract

In an earlier paper Heradstveit and Bonham focused on the “axis of evil” metaphor used by President Bush in his State of the Union Address to Congress on 29 January 2002. After describing “axis” as a metonym for fascism and Nazism and “evil” as a metonym for Satanic forces that implies an alliance of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea that is collectively responsible for evil deeds, the authors analyzed the impact of this metaphor on the Iranian self-image and politics based on in depth interviews with members of the Iranian oppositional elite. They conclude that the metaphor became a powerful rhetorical tool for mobilizing ultra-conservative forces in Iran.² In this paper Bonham and Heradstveit analyze the rhetorical techniques and strategies, including metaphors, in President Obama’s speech at Cairo University on 4 June 2009, where he proposes a “new beginning,” as well as the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar on 13 February 2010. Whereas Bush will be remembered for the skillful but misguided construction of a new way of seeing the world, Obama is seen as proposing through his references to the Holy Koran and “a new beginning” an attempt to empathize with the “other” and regain control over how the Muslim world sees the United States and the West.

Introduction

Thirty years ago Heradstveit published **The Arab-Israeli Conflict Psychological Obstacles to Peace**.³ In the book Heradstveit applied the principles of consistency theory and attribution theory, as well as the operational code approach, to the conflict in the Middle East. The results of the research were based on interviews between 1970 and 1976 with elite informants, including government officials, in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

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²Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran," **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 61, 421-440.

³Daniel Heradstveit, **The Arab-Israeli Conflict. Psychological Obstacles to Peace**. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979.

Although the focus of the research was the Arab-Israeli conflict, the results are highly relevant to the thirty-year conflict between Iran and the United States. For example, Heradstveit found support in his interviews for the proposition that the devil image of the opponent is highly resistant to change and often takes on the character of self-fulfilling prophecies (Heradstveit, 1979, p. 123). In addition, he found evidence for the idea that an observed moderate change in the opponent's behavior will be seen as temporary because the change is based on situational factors and does not necessarily reflect a change in the opponent's dispositions (p. 125). Heradstveit also was able to distinguish between two different belief-patterns, the "Innovator," a person who does not see the conflict from a zero-sum perspective and believes that a new relationship is feasible, and the "Traditionalist," who is more competitive and less willing to change (p. 128).

Applied to current relations between Iran and the United States, Obama is the "innovator," who believes a new relationship is possible, while Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, is the "traditionalist." Because he sees Obama as a "sweet talker" who is responding to situational factors, Ali Khamenei rejected Obama's initiatives, since they do not reflect his true beliefs about Iran.⁴ He may also, of course, feel threatened by the entirely new discourse from the "Big Satan."

Cultural Obstacles

In 1991 Raymond Cohen explored cultural obstacles that inhibit communication in international diplomacy.⁵ Cohen argued that intercultural negotiation may be especially prone to miscommunication. "For there to be real understanding...the parties engaged must be able to draw upon matching semantic assumptions. And this ability occurs optimally within the boundaries of a common culture."⁶ Cohen went on to describe and illustrate cross-cultural contradictions that may influence diplomatic encounters, such as American individualism vs. non-Western collective impulses, different uses of language by Americans non-Westerners, monochronic vs. polychronic concepts of time, and "low-context" vs. "high-context" negotiating styles.⁷ These concepts, as well as other cultural factors, were illustrated with references to the negotiating styles of China, Egypt, India, Japan, Mexico, and the (former) Soviet Union.

More recent research by Heradstveit and Bonham in the Arab world, which focused on how foreign policy elites attributed the causes of the Gulf War provided additional support for attribution theory from the field of cognitive

⁴ Speaking shortly before President Obama's Cairo address at a gathering to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, Ali Khamenei said, "Even if [Obama] delivers hundreds of speeches and talks very sweetly, there will not be a change in how the Islamic countries perceive the United States." **Washington Post**, 5 June 2009.

⁵ Raymond Cohen, **Negotiating Across Cultures. Communication Obstacles in International Diplomacy**. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1991.

⁶ Cohen, 1991, pp. 20-21.

⁷ Cohen, 1991, pp. 22-32.

psychology, although some of the results were not completely consistent with the fundamental attribution hypothesis.⁸ Furthermore, the research, conducted in three countries, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, also suggested that cultural differences might also be involved. The authors concluded that “attributions which, on the surface, seem to refer merely to features of the situation can thus carry undertones of or associations to an (evil) disposition. These undertones can be communicated effectively within a given culture but are not always “heard” across cultural boundaries (p. 287).” The authors went on to argue that future research should focus on linguistic practices that are common to a particular group or culture.⁹

Approaches and Methods

In this paper we will analyze and compare linguistic formulations of President George Bush and President Barak Obama as they talk about the Muslim world, particularly relations between the United States and Iran. We are especially interested in their use of culturally-specific cognitive structures, including figurative language, to discuss the future of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Many linguistic expressions used by officials like Bush and Obama are metaphorical, and various metaphors of causation are quite common in political texts. For example, in the Limited Test Ban negotiations President Kennedy said “the cold war *brings* burdens and dangers to so many countries....nuclear powers must *avert* those confrontations which *bring* an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war.” In these passages words with originally spatial semantics are used to suggest causal meaning through metaphorical transfer from spatial image schemas to causal target domains.¹⁰

⁸ “Attribution Theory and Arab Images of the Gulf War,” **Political Psychology**, 17 (1996), 271-292.

⁹ Rather than thinking about how individuals construe an event or situation, psychologically, one can treat construals as the pre-understandings that represent collective representations of a culture or subculture (G. Matthew Bonham et al., “The Limited Test-Ban Agreement: Emergence of New Knowledge Structures in International Negotiation,” **International Studies Quarterly**, 41, p. 217). This approach “obviates the need for recourse to the interiority of a conscious, meaning-giving subject, either in terms of psychological and cognitive characteristics of individuals or shared mental templates of social collectives” (Roxanne. L. Doty, “Foreign Policy as Social Communication: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines,” **International Studies Quarterly**, 37, 297-320). Instead, the source of meaning in a particular situation may reside, in part, in the linguistic practices that are common to a group, organization, or culture. Future research within this linguistic tradition would “attend less to the referential function of language performances than to the culture of self-understanding, the shared meaning commitments . . . that are institutionalized in language practices” (Michael J. Shapiro et al., “A Discursive Practices Approach to Collective Decision-Making,” **International Studies Quarterly**, 32 (1988), pp. 397-420). Within a language-based ontology, research would focus on the historically (and culturally) developed practices that reside in the grammatical, rhetorical, and narrative structure that comprises discourse on events like the Gulf war.” (Heradstveit and Bonham, 1996, p. 287).

¹⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, **Metaphors We Live By**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

To identify and analyze the connotative language of Bush and Obama, we will make use of the technique of critical metaphor analysis. Critical metaphor analysis is an approach “that aims to identify the intentions and ideologies underlying language use.”¹¹ The approach is based on the work of Lakoff and Johnson, which has been further modified by others.¹² “The basic claims of this approach are that the mind is inherently embodied, thought is mostly unconscious and abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.”¹³ The technique provides an economical way of identifying metaphorical and metonymic thinking, as well as describing and conceptual metaphors. Additional analysis is necessary, however, to provide the social and cultural context of the metaphor.¹⁴

To provide a contextual analysis, we turn to the continental semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. For Saussure, a sign consists of a **signifier** and a **signified**. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as **signification**, which is represented in the Saussurean diagram by arrows. The horizontal line marking the two elements of the sign is referred to as the bar. For example, the word “terrorist” is a *sign* consisting of the following: A *signifier*, the word “terrorist,” and a *signified* concept—a person who attacks innocent civilian targets. A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. You cannot have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified. The same signifier could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign).

In the case of terrorism, the signifier, “terrorism” is used widely by many including the governments of the USA, Russia, and Sri Lanka. But the signified, the perpetrators and what they do are quite different: Al-Qaida, the Chechens, and the Tamil Tigers. Because the designation of **signified** depends upon the speaker, the concept of terrorism is seems to be subjective and fluid. The **signified** switches radically both by context and over time. The only aspect that is stable is the **signifier**, “terrorism.”

The rhetoric of terrorism is being waged with “weapons” that are loose, diffuse, and highly flexible. The signifier is clear-cut, but the signified is not. Thus, the “war on terrorism” is largely a rhetorical instrument—a form of political communication that plays on emotions.

¹¹ Jonathan Charteris-Black, p. 26.

¹² See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, **Philosophy in the Flesh: Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; George Lakoff, **Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Metaphor” in A. Ortony (ed.) **Metaphor and Thought**, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 202-51; and George Lakoff, **Moral Politics**, 2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002; George Lakoff and Turner, **More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; Mark Johnson, **The Body in the Mind**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

¹³ Jonathan Charteris-Black, p. 26.

¹⁴ Jonathan Charteris-Black, p. 29.

Metaphor as Political Communication

Denotative language uses many words in a seemingly neutral, precise manner to describe a phenomenon. For this reason it functions very poorly as a rhetorical instrument, for rhetoric works best with connotative language, i.e., using few words in a loose, diffuse and flexible manner. Rhetorical discourse is also affective, and there are few words that pack such an emotional punch as “terrorism.”

The use of metaphors, such as the “war on terrorism,” can be a highly effective technique of political communication. Such figures of speech are often used by political leaders to persuade others, including the leaders of other countries as well as their own people. Metaphors are powerful, because they exploit “the associative power of language and represent “a certain way of viewing the world that reflects a shared system of belief as to what the world is and culture-specific beliefs about mankind’s place in it....Metaphor *provokes* affective responses because it draws on value systems...embedded in a culture where certain types of entity are associated with positive or negative experiences or may be universal.”¹⁵

In the United States, for example, an ancestor of the “war on terrorism” is the “war on drugs,” which similarly legitimized extraordinary measures with consequences for due process and civil liberties. Common to both “wars” appears to be the financing of American police departments by forfeiture of assets considered to be drug- or terrorism-related, which offers certain players a powerful stake in the continuance and development of the system.

Metaphor and Metonymy

How does metaphor create new insight, a new understanding? Ricoeur, quoting Black,¹⁶ uses an example to describe the mechanism: Let our metaphor be “Man is a wolf.” The focus, “wolf,” operates not on the basis of lexical meaning, but by virtue...of the opinions and preconceptions to which a reader in a linguistic community, by the fact that he speaks, finds himself committed....To call a man a wolf is to evoke the lupine system of associated commonplaces. One speaks then of the man in “wolf-language.” Acting as a filter or a screen, “The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, organizes our view of man.” In this way metaphor confers an “insight.”¹⁷

In the study of discourse rhetoricians distinguish between metaphor and metonymy. Schofer and Rice characterize metaphor as a “semantic and

¹⁵ Jonathan Charteris-Black, **Politicians and Rhetoric**. *The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. Houndsmill and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 20.

¹⁶ Max Black, **Models and Metaphors**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, **The Rule of Metaphor**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. 87.

referential relationship of *resemblance* made possible by the possession of one or more common features.” The metaphorical processes involve a transfer of meaning. Metonymy, on the other hand, can be characterized by a “semantic and referential relationship of *causality* made possible by the category of semantic feature *cause*. Their definition of metonymy suggests a major limitation of this trope.¹⁸

Sapir proposes that metaphor “states an equivalence between terms taken from separate semantic domains,” such as “George the Lion,” when applied to a football player. Metonymy, according to Sapir, “replaces or juxtaposes contiguous terms that occupy a distinct and separate place with what is considered a single semantic or perceptual domain.” For example, Homer will often be used instead of the *Iliad*: “you will read in Homer.”¹⁹ Sapir treats metonymy as the logical inverse of a metaphor. Rather than emphasizing the relationship between two terms taken from different domains, metonymy “emphasizes the whole, the entire domain shared by two terms, and its success as a trope depends upon how fully this idea of wholeness can be conveyed.”²⁰

Ontological Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson argue that our experience with physical objects provide the basis for ontological metaphors, that is metaphors about “being.” For example, we often view inflation as an entity: “We need to *combat inflation*”; “Inflation is *taking its toll* at the gasoline pump”; “If there is much *more inflation*, we will not survive”; “*Inflation makes me* sick.” Viewing inflation as an entity enables us to refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect, see it as a cause, and act with respect to it. Nevertheless, viewing a non-physical thing as an entity does not allow us to comprehend much about it. To do this, the metaphor has to be elaborated to specify different kinds of objects.²¹

Ontological metaphors like these are so natural that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena. We believe the statement, “He cracked under pressure” to be either true or false. The fact that it is metaphorical never occurs to us...and we do not bother to analyze its appropriateness as a metaphor. For example, former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi described terrorism as follows: “International terrorism is a despicable act that threatens the lives and lifestyles of people all over the world and the peace and security of all countries of the world (8 October 2001).” Here,

¹⁸Peter Schofer and Donald Rice, “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Synecdoche Revis (it)ed,” *Semiotica* Vol. 21, No. 1/2 (1977), pp. 122-123.

¹⁹J. David Sapir, “The Anatomy of Metaphor,” in *The Social Use of Metaphor*, ed. J. D. Sapir and J. C. Crocker, Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1977, p. 4.

²⁰Sapir, p. 20.

²¹George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

terrorism, a non-physical thing, is treated as an entity or thing that has an objective reality.

Like inflation, this view of terrorism enables us to suggest how to act. As Koizumi pointed out, we must "...prevent and eradicate international terrorism." (8 October 2001). Note also here that another metaphor is evoked: "terrorism is contagion" that must be eradicated. As in the case of disease, we must "actively contribute to international efforts to prevent and eradicate terrorism (8 October 2001)." Although the treatment of terrorism as an entity helps us to talk about terrorism, it does little to increase our understanding of the phenomenon or communicate effectively across cultures.

The "war on terrorism" metaphor, like other metaphors used by political leaders, communicates a simple message to the public. The message divides the world with respect to friends and enemies. The message also suggests what is to be done, namely, wage a struggle against an entity--terrorism. However, like the "cold war," the metaphor suggests little meaning and explains nothing about the phenomenon and its implications.

President Bush

The Axis of Evil Speech²²

In his State of the Union message to Congress on 29 January 2002, President Bush used the expression, the "Axis of Evil," to include Iraq, Iran, and North Korea: "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger."²³

The phrase itself was constructed by David Frum, a White House speech writer, who used the term, "Axis of Hatred," to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism. Frum's boss, Michael Gerson, a self-described evangelical Christian, changed the phrase to "Axis of Evil" to make it sound "more sinister, even wicked."²⁴ Later Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's National Security Advisor, and Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, suggested adding North Korea and Iran as part of the Axis. Hadley had second thoughts about adding Iran, because it had a democratically elected president, but Bush liked the idea of

²²An earlier version of this analysis of President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech and metaphor was published by the authors as "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran," **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 61, 2007, pp.421-440.

²³"North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror." President George Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January 2002.

²⁴Bob Woodward, **Plan of Attack**, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 87.

including Iran. “No, the president said, “I want it in.”²⁵ In an interview with Bob Woodward, Bush later elaborated his reasoning behind including Iran: “And the fact that the president of the United States would stand up and say Iran is just like Iraq and North Korea—in other words you’ve got a problem—and the president is willing to call it, is part of how you deal with Iran. And that will inspire those who love freedom inside the country.”²⁶

In the end, President Bush’s senior advisors, such as Karl Rove, thought that the “Axis of Evil” was a signature phrase, “a declaration...that the country now would have a great mission. It was big, new, and different.”²⁷ Although some doubted whether it would make sense to link the three countries, the metaphor was regarded by the President’s advisors as a “watershed” that would define the problem in “graphic, biblical terms without publicly committing to a particular solution.”²⁸

The use of the phrase “Axis of Evil” was a restructuring of the American understanding of the “War on Terror,” in which the focus shifted from bin Laden and al-Qaida, with their allies and bases in Afghanistan, to a series of other states, whose involvement in that operation ranged from minimal to non-existent. The uncharitable might link this shift to the failure to catch Osama bin Laden, in that the Administration had a need to show that it was still “doing something,” even if that something was unconnected with bringing the WTC attackers to justice.

The key concepts in this restructuring have been firstly “terrorist states,” which implies the “indivisibility of terrorism”²⁹ and therefore the collective responsibility for 9/11 of any state so designated; and secondly, “weapons of mass destruction,” because anyone who possesses them may be tempted to sell or give them to “terrorists,” thus evoking fears of chemical, biological, or even nuclear attacks on American cities. However, anyone who *already* possesses nuclear weapons is immune from attack, as for instance Pakistan, whose military intelligence service was the chief sponsor of the Taliban, and possibly North Korea.

At first the United States concentrated on the Iranian development, with Russian assistance, of a nuclear power station in Bushehr. The United States believed that this can be used to produce nuclear weapons. Subsequently, the United States learned to its own surprise that Iran had a nuclear weapons development program near the city of Natanz. Secretary of State Colin Powell used this as an example of how a country, determined to develop nuclear weapons, can keep the process hidden from inspectors and other outsiders.³⁰

²⁵Woodward, p. 88.

²⁶Woodward, p. 88.

²⁷Woodward, p. 90.

²⁸Woodward, pp. 93-94.

²⁹The phrase, “indivisibility of terrorism,” was used by Rupert Cornwell, “How War in the Middle East Roils Transatlantic Relations,” **European Affairs**, 3, 2002.

³⁰“Powell Says Iran Is Pursuing Bomb,” **Washington Post**, November 18, 2004, p. A01.

The *topos* of “terrorist states with weapons of mass destruction” is therefore confined to hostile states that *may*, at some time in the future, acquire nuclear weapons which they *may*, at some time in the future, possibly be tempted to bestow on terrorists. Iran most definitely qualifies under these criteria, in that it is considered a hostile state, has a nuclear program, and cannot prove that it will not so bestow these weapons, since no one can prove a negative. The American government’s approach to the burden of proof was amply demonstrated in the case of Iraq, where it asserted that neither the United States nor the UN needed to prove that Iraq had WMDs, but that the Iraqis had to prove that they did not, and that any evidence presented was fake.

Two other reasons for granting Iran membership in the “Axis of Evil” are probably the theocracy’s general hostility to the United States (opposition to Good must necessarily be Evil) and its attitude to terrorism; generally, that Iran does not consider the Palestinians’ struggle against the Israelis to constitute terrorism, and specifically, the country’s support for Hizbollah in Lebanon.

The AXIS OF EVIL Metaphor

Many observers in the United States and Europe were both amused and puzzled by President Bush’s use of the phrase, “Axis of Evil.” Some regarded the phrase as just empty rhetoric that was designed to appeal to domestic audiences in the United States, such as evangelical Christians. For example, the phrase spawned the “Axis of Evil Cookbook,” which was published by the NthPosition, an on-line magazine.³¹ Although this phrase may have been an invention of the President’s speech writers, it contains metonymic concepts that are grounded in experience and, like metaphors, “structure not just our language but also our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.”³²

Bush used the word “evil” five times in this speech, three times referring to enemies. He used it also in his speech to the nation on 11 September 2001, and a week later to Congress he described terrorists as “planning evil.” In November of that year Bush told **Newsweek** that Saddam was also “evil.” These are clear examples of demonization, and one of the reasons the phrase the “Axis of Evil” attracted so much criticism and is said to have done so much damage is that calling other countries “evil” is not generally considered to be the language of diplomacy. There is probably an echo of Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” for the Soviet Union, which was equally criticized at the time. It is possible that many Americans semi-consciously imagine that, since the Evil Empire is no longer with us, the application of such a label has a beneficent effect that can be repeated in the case of the new enemies. This may be connected with the rise of fundamentalist Christianity, which is encouraging them to see world politics in eschatological terms.

³¹See http://www.nthposition.com/axis_booklet.pdf.

³²Lakoff and Johnson, p. 39.

Certainly Bush and some of his advisors, as evangelical Christians, may have a tendency towards a dualistic view of life, as a struggle between Good and Evil, with no middle ground. "Those who are not with us, are against us," he told the more secular Europeans, who insist on trying to understand the complexities.³³ Although the use of the word "evil" for flying hijacked aircraft into civilian buildings will strike many people as justified, it is the corollary, the other side of the eschatological coin, which is especially dangerous: the assumption that the division of Good and Evil coincides with the division between Us and Them. Consequently, in this dualistic world-picture, the United States is a Force for Good, even *the* Force for Good. This means that anything it chooses to do is Good and anything that offends or inconveniences it is Evil.

The important thing about the "evil" component of metaphor is that evil has no specific goal--except to produce evil. As an ontological force "evil" has no interests of its own except the interests related to its destination: that is why all negotiations with evil are fruitless. There is no way to make a deal with "evil," except to include in this deal even a greater evil, not for you but for others. Therefore, the Forces of Evil have to be destroyed totally by the Forces of Good. Moreover, the absurd unity of such different political forces as Iran and North Korea seem not to be so absurd, if you agree the principle of Unity of Evil. If there is only one evil, all its incarnations are simply the different forms of one force--an argument which is very easy to understand, when you accept the dualistic ontology. Here the ontological changes produced by metaphor are obvious.³⁴

The Axis component can be considered on several levels. In the first place, it is an incoherent metaphor, as an axis is a straight line; the figurative use is, in fact, taken not from Cartesian geometry (the x and y axes on a graph) but from the axis of the Earth's rotation. An axis around which something revolves is made by two points; you can have three points joined in a triangle, but then nothing can revolve around a triangle. This geometrical usage actually derives from a misunderstood modification to the metaphor shortly after it was coined.

The original Axis was that between Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy; originally rivals, they were driven together by the Western Powers' hostility to the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the conquest of Ethiopia. In 1936 they announced that henceforth the world would revolve around the Rome-Berlin Axis. Germany and Italy thus became "the Axis Powers." On 1 November 1936 Mussolini reported on the historic agreement between Germany and Italy, and he

³³On 16 September 2001, President Bush stated, in response to a question about homeland security and civil rights, "This is a new kind of -- a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while." Remarks by the President Upon Arrival, September 16, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

³⁴The authors would like to thank Victor M. Sergeev for these insights about the "Axis of Evil" metaphor.

said, "This Berlin-Rome vertical line is not an obstacle but rather an axis around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace."³⁵ After the signature of the tripartite Anti-Comintern Pact later in the year, Japan was called an Axis Power too, but in fact there was no strategic collaboration between the European Axis and the Japanese.

The metaphor has thus been a logical absurdity but a powerful affective tool since 1936. "Axis" evokes "our" enemies of the Second World War, and it is a metonym for Nazism and fascism.³⁶ This historical resonance is the second level. Nobody today can in polite society say anything good about the Axis Powers, and anyone compared with them is stigmatized.

A third and related level is that the AXIS OF EVIL implies the alliance of the countries included in it. Given the intense antipathy between Iraq and Iran, and the lack of much visible connection between either and North Korea, the trope has occasioned much ridicule, with TV and Internet wits grouping together triplets of countries allegedly offended at being left out of the Axis. In theory, we might speak of the world revolving around an axis of inveterate enemies, in the sense that their quarrel is what powers international politics. That would be a reasonable use of the metaphor, and using it for Iran-Iraq (without North Korea) would not be inappropriate; but the public consensus seems to be that this is not in fact what President Bush meant. Nor would such a use have much mobilizing power. It appears rather that Bush was using the AXIS metaphor in the original sense, to suggest that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were not only Evil countries in themselves, but they were in alliance with one another against the rest of us. In other words, this is not merely Evil but a *conspiracy* of Evil. Now, demonization and conspiracy theories always go hand in hand; the human mind appears to be naturally inclined to weave all perceived threats into a single pattern.

In this way the AXIS OF EVIL allows a return to the bipolar world of the twentieth century, when all one's enemies were fronts for International Jewry, International Capital or International Communism. It allows Americans to think that "evil" is a feature of particular geographical regions, faraway countries about which they know little, and thus not of Texas or Wyoming, which are part of the Kingdom of Good. It suggests that "terrorism" is something that is mostly created or promoted by a list of countries acting in concert, but whose membership is not fixed forever. We can easily envisage the AXIS OF EVIL in the year 2010 being two or three countries other than Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

We would also like to note how the use of the tropes of the WAR ON TERROR and the AXIS OF EVIL in the same discourse serve to imply, without actually

³⁵Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (eds.), Florence, 1951-1960, Rome, 1978-1980), volume 28, pp. 67-72.

³⁶Lakoff and Johnson point out that "metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another....Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another," p. 36.

stating, that the Axis is *collectively* responsible for the attacks of 9/11. The attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction, the promotion of radical-Islamic terrorism and acts of general dictatorial unpleasantness are all mixed up together, with the implication that responsibility for any one of them is responsibility for all of them. This we might call the principle of “the indivisibility of evil.”

There is a striking similarity between the “war against terrorism and the “war against communism.” Although the content is different, both metaphors have the same structure. Both target entire countries, not their leaders. It does not differentiate between the evil leaders and the others who live in the country. The reformers, for example, did not want to be viewed as evil, but the metaphor painted them with the same brush of evil. This must be resisted by joining with the conservatives and rallying around the government. In other words, the metaphor mobilized the entire country – including “friends” of the US. We would also argue that, while Great Powers know that their own citizens forget their differences and rally to the flag when attacked, they always seem to have difficulty understanding why this might also be the case for their enemies.

We would also point out that the crafters of a rhetorical device intended to function in one cultural and political context have only imperfect control over how that device is received and exploited in an alien cultural and political context. This is exactly what we have witnessed with dramatic changes in the political context after the metaphor was originally articulated. Since then there has been one dramatic intervening event: The war in Iraq. The impact of this event is too well known, discussed, and analyzed to dwell further upon here. Suffice to say that the war in Iraq has been a “reality check” on what a superpower can achieve and not achieve in the region. The war in Iraq has been a learning experience for a whole global audience having to change many of its pre-war perceptions of a superpower being gradually weakened in its self-image as well as weakened in the eyes of the world.

President Obama

Shortly after his inauguration, President Barak Obama signaled a change in US foreign policy toward the Islamic world in an interview on Al-Arabiya. In the interview, President Obama distanced himself from the Bush Administration by stressing the importance of listening as well as working with the European Union, Russia, and “all Arab states in the region.” Then, he promised that “we are ready to initiate a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest...”³⁷

³⁷“And so what we want to do is to listen, set aside some of the preconceptions that have existed and have built up over the last several years. And I think if we do that, then there’s a possibility at least of achieving some breakthroughs.” Interview with Hisham Melhem, **Al-Arabiya**, 26 January 2009.

In the Al-Arabiya interview President Obama also expressed awareness of his own discursive practices. He said that his “job is to communicate the fact that the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world, that the language we use has to be a language of respect. I have Muslim members of my family. I have lived in Muslim countries.” Later in the interview he described his role as someone who can narrow the cultural distance between the United States and the Muslim world:

And my job is to communicate to the American people that the Muslim world is filled with extraordinary people who simply want to live their lives and see their children live better lives. My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy.

Throughout the Al-Arabiya interview Obama seemed to be acutely aware of the importance of language in cultural communication. At one point he tells the interviewer that “I think that you’re making a very important point. And that is that the language we use matters.”

Toward the end of the interview, President Obama focused on the relationship between the United States and Iran. Obama began on a positive note (“Now, the Iranian people are a great people, and the Persian civilization is a great civilization”), but he went on to point out that “Iran has acted in ways that’s not conducive to peace and prosperity in the region...” He ended the interview by repeating a line from his inauguration speech: “If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us.” Thus, for President Obama a HANDSHAKE is a metaphor that has relevance in both business and international relations.

On 20 March 2009 President Obama, in a recorded message to the people and leaders of Iran, extended his best wishes to all who were celebrating the Persian New Year, Nowruz. He said in the video recording that his “administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community.” President Obama went on to describe “a future with renewed exchanges among our people, and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce.”

On the following day Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, rejected this overture, saying, “They chant the slogan of change but no change is seen in practice.” Nevertheless, the process began, and, on 31 March 2009 Richard Holbrooke, the administration’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan greeted Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Mohammad Mehdi Akondzadeh with a handshake at a conference on Afghanistan in The Hague, Netherlands. This was the first face-to-face encounter between the Obama administration and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The effort by the United States to engage Iran suffered a severe setback in the aftermath of Iran's tenth presidential election, which took place on 12 June 2009. In response to the repression of Iranians who protested the election results and censorship of information by the Iranian government, the United States adopted a tougher line. For example, during a press briefing on 23 June 2009, President Obama said that "the United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, the beatings and imprisonments" and he went on to "strongly condemn these unjust actions..." He also denounced the efforts of the government to censor information by once again invoking the HANDSHAKE metaphor: "In 2009, no iron fist is strong enough to shut off the world from bearing witness to peaceful protests of justice. Despite the Iranian government's efforts to expel journalists and isolate itself, powerful images and poignant words have made their way to us through cell phones and computers. And so we've watched what the Iranian people are doing." Nevertheless, President Obama did not say that the United States would refrain from engaging Iran and reaching out to the Iranian people.

The Cairo Speech

In his interview on Al-Arabiya, President Obama promised to "address the Muslim world from a Muslim capital." Despite the probes of the interviewer, however, the president did not reveal the name of that capital, Cairo.

The Cairo Speech, which President Obama delivered on 4 June 2009, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," was a dramatic meeting with Islam. Almost everything that he said in this speech had an impact that continues to be felt today, because it established a new American paradigm for relating to the Muslim world.

President Obama began his address by acknowledging the hospitality of Cairo University and the Egyptian people and bringing a greeting of peace from the Muslim communities in the United States: *Assalaamu alaykum!* He went on to describe the tension between the United States and Muslims around the world, "tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate" that has been exploited by "violent extremists." Then, President Obama said that he had come to Cairo to seek "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

After stating the goal of his address, the President introduced himself to the audience:

Now part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I'm a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the *azaan* at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith.

So I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was first

revealed. That experience guides my conviction that partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't.

The message was simple and effective: I am one of you!

The FAMILY Metaphor

One of the dominant metaphors in President Obama's Cairo speech is the FAMILY. In a commencement address at the University of Notre Dame on 17 May 2009, he provided a preview of the idea that the WORLD IS A FAMILY.³⁸ Despite the growing diversity in the world, including "diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief," we "must find a way to live together as one human family." He went on to say, however, that this would be difficult to achieve because of the "imperfections of man—our selfishness, our pride, our stubbornness, our acquisitiveness, our insecurities, our egos: all the cruelties large and small that those of us in the Christian tradition understand to be rooted in original sin."

Less than three weeks later in Cairo, President Obama elaborated the FAMILY metaphor by emphasizing what Americans have in common: "We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: *E pluribus unum* – 'Out of many, one.'" The members of this "family" can live together in the United States, "regardless of race, religion, and station in life," because "all of us share common aspirations--to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God. These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity."

To accomplish this goal, according to President Obama, we have to communicate better with each other. "There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground. As the Holy Koran tells us, 'Be conscious of God and speak always the truth'." Later in the speech he uses the metaphor to talk specifically about the Arab-Israeli conflict:

Too many tears have been shed. Too much blood has been shed. All of us have a responsibility to work for the day when the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians can see their children grow up without fear; when the Holy Land of the three great faiths is the place of peace that God intended it to be; when Jerusalem is a secure and lasting home for Jews and Christians and Muslims, and a place for all of the children of Abraham to mingle peacefully together as in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, peace be upon them, joined in prayer.

³⁸"Remember that each of us, endowed with the dignity possessed by all children of God, has the grace to recognize ourselves in one another; to understand that we all seek the same love of family, the same fulfillment of a life well lived." Commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame, 17 May 2009.

Throughout the address, President Obama makes use of the FAMILY metaphor to articulate his vision of the world. The President wants to “focus on the future we seek for our children,” for example, and he imagines “a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God’s children are respected.” President Obama ends his address by returning to a religious discourse with a strong interfaith theme to solve problems at the community level. He argues that “around the world, we can turn dialogue into interfaith service, so bridges between peoples lead to action -- whether it is combating malaria in Africa, or providing relief after a natural disaster.” He ends the speech by returning to the FAMILY metaphor to show how people from three major religions can achieve God’s vision on earth:

The Holy Koran tells us: ‘O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.’ The Talmud tells us: ‘The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace.’ The Holy Bible tells us: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.’ The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now that must be our work here on Earth. Thank you. And may God's peace be upon you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

The Doha Speech

It is instructive to compare the Cairo speech with the speech President Obama prepared for the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, on 13 February 2010. In Cairo President Obama greeted the audience with *Assalaamu alaykum*, which was totally unexpected. When he used this greeting, Muslim audiences may have perceived it as an attempt to empathize with their religion, while American audiences by and large may have perceived the greeting as simply a gesture of politeness. The same words that are spoken can be perceived differently by different audiences, depending on their world views and values. We have argued that this is what happened, when President Bush used the AXIS OF EVIL metaphor in his State of the Union Address.

In Doha President Obama began his remarks with *Assalaamu alaykum*. For Obama this did not sound artificial; on the contrary, with his dark skin and Muslim family background it sounded like the most natural thing in the world to say. At the same time it is very forceful for an American president to say this greeting, because it is a metonym for the whole Muslim World. No leader in Europe could utter these words without sounding somewhat misplaced and artificial. The importance of the credibility of the speaker is underlined in the theory of rhetoric. President Obama has the credibility to utter this greeting. It may be a small thing, but it becomes big when Obama says it. Note that these are the very first words he utters: If came later in the speech it would not have nearly the same dramatic effect.

In his Doha remarks President Obama moves somewhat from an emotional speech form to a more denotative speech form. This speech is more goal-oriented and business-like than in the Cairo address. For example, he talks in

detail about "partnering" on education, economic development, science and technology, and global health. He also paints a more precise picture of the enemy: violent extremism and corruption.³⁹ For President Obama, knowledge is "the currency of the 21st century." This KNOWLEDGE IS CURRENCY metaphor also draws attention to the realm of business and finance.

In short, President Obama is moving from charismatic rhetoric in the Cairo speech, which he masters to perfection, to a more pragmatic phase of his presidency, where the discourse becomes more difficult, because he is more like "everybody else." One might argue that he loses his magic in the process. For Bush this was easier, because he had the Image of the opponent to lean on throughout his presidency.

More recently, President Obama has made a transition to the discourse of President Bush. In a speech at the United States Military Academy Graduation on 22 May 2010, for example, he advocated a "strategy of national renewal and global influence." In this address, he told the cadets that "we have to shape an international order that can meet the challenges of our generation," including "countering violent extremism and insurgency" and "stopping the spread of nuclear weapons."

A few weeks later, after the vote of the UN Security Council to sanction Iran, President Obama asserted that Iran had "failed to live up to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," while "Iran's leaders hide behind outlandish rhetoric..." According to President Obama, Iran is locked in the past: "As I said in Cairo, for decades the Iranian government has defined itself in opposition to my country. But faced with the opportunity to find a new way forward—one that would benefit its own people—the Iranian government has chosen instead to remain a prisoner of the past."⁴⁰ Here President Obama is using structural metaphors that organize one concept in terms of another, such as structural metaphors associated with A JOURNEY: "this isn't *going anywhere*," "our relationship is a *dead end*," and the orientational metaphor, "the future is *forward*."⁴¹

President Bush and President Obama

In spite of differences in style and outlook, President Bush and President Obama

³⁹"In Afghanistan and beyond, we are forging partnerships to isolate violent extremists, reduce corruption and to promote good governance and development that improves lives."

⁴⁰"Remarks by the President on United Nations Security Council Resolution on Iran Sanctions," 9 June 2010.

⁴¹L. David Richie, **Context and Connection in Metaphor**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 137.

share the histories of their nation, and, unlike recent British politicians, rely heavily on personifications of the United States.⁴²

Both American leaders also make use of religious discourse. The State of the Union Address reflects Bush's strong moralistic outlook.⁴³ President Obama used "a new beginning" three times in Cairo. *Assalaamu alaykum* (peace be upon you) is also religious, of course, and President Obama's speech in Cairo contains other references to religious texts. Similarly, his address at the University of Notre Dame makes reference to original sin, prayer, and the Bible: "Remember that each of us, endowed with the dignity possessed by all children of God, has the grace to recognize ourselves in one another; to understand that we all seek the same love of family, the same fulfillment of a life well lived. Remember that in the end, in some way we are all fisherman."

Nevertheless, the references to "Evil" by President Bush and "a new beginning" by President Obama tell us something about differences in their world views. President Bush used "Evil" to exclude people and distance "The Other," while President Obama used "a new beginning" to make a statement about inclusion. When President Obama speaks to "The Other," he is a "well-wisher" with an extended hand (HANDSHAKE): "May God's Peace Be Upon You."

A semiotic analysis of "Islamic" is also revealing. Although the signifier is the same for both presidents, the signified for President Bush is a world that "greeted the fall of tyranny with song and celebration" and consists of "brave men and women" who support our values: "the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance." In other words people in the Islamic world are much like us. For President Obama, on the other hand, the signifier is a place where he "heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk," a place that "has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation." "Islamic" for President Obama is a sign for a culture with strong traditions that are different from those of the West.

Similarly, "Iran" is a signifier that has a different signified, depending upon the speaker. For President Bush, "Iran" is a regime that "pursues" weapons of mass destruction, "exports" terror, and "represses" the hopes of its people for freedom. For Obama, on the other hand, "Iran" is a country that has had a "tumultuous" relationship with the United States, a history that has been a source of tension

⁴²"...the conceptual metaphor THE NATION IS A PERSON is more typical of American politicians than British politicians—irrespective of left- or right-wing orientation." Jonathan Charteris-Black, p. 174.

⁴³"The Axis of Evil speech marked a shift in Bush Junior's rhetoric from the NATION IS A PERSON conceptual metaphor to a new metaphor: THE USA IS A MORAL LEADER." Jonathan Charteris-Black, p. 176.

and mistrust. Although Iran “could lead the world down a hugely dangerous path,” there is still the opportunity to “move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.” “Iran” for President Bush is a threat, but for President Obama “Iran” presents an opportunity.

Differences in the signified, of course, may reflect contextual factors. In 2002 President Bush was addressing the American people four months after 9/11, while President Obama’s audience was the Muslim world more than seven years later. Furthermore, the concept of “A New Beginning” takes on different meanings, depending on the audience. The implication for the Muslim world is that a better world may emerge. For an audience in the United States, especially a Christian audience, on the other hand, the phrase might suggest being “born again.” This provides support for the proposition that effective rhetorical discourse contains concepts that are loaded with emotion but vague and unclear. The minute the speaker begins to define these concepts; they begin to lose their force.⁴⁴

The Challenge for President Obama

One of the challenges that President Obama faces with respect to the Muslim world is to deliver a clear-cut message to multiple audiences who do not share his own cultural, historical, and religious traditions. President Bush ignored this challenge, and, as a consequence, found that his message strengthened the rhetorical position of conservatives *vis-à-vis* reformers in Iran.⁴⁵

When President Obama gave his address in Cairo, he was talking to the Muslim world. But the “Muslim world,” is not homogenous. His audience may have been “the street,” but it also included the elite in the Muslim world—people who want something more. Well-educated people want to go beyond emotional language to find information that is “factual” and “objective.”⁴⁶ In addition, President Obama has to keep in mind the American and European audiences, who have different world views and values. Many Europeans, for example, did not like the moralistic discourse of President Bush (and Prime Minister Blair). This is a big problem for a world leader like President Obama. How do you communicate to audiences at home and abroad, as well as opponents, without being accused of double talk? Can you talk to all of these audiences simultaneously and run the risk of targeting values that are easily understood at home but misunderstood by audiences abroad?

⁴⁴When you look at Saddam’s speeches, for example, they were filled with metaphorical language from history and the Holy Koran. For example: The invaders have now put their dirty feet in the holy places of Islam. The implication is that “we have to stand up and fight.”

⁴⁵Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007, pp. 434-438.

⁴⁶One reason the White House has created a Web-site to track the progress with respect to the implementation of “A New Beginning” is to reach out to the elite audience in the Muslim world. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning/>.