

A Nation of Victims

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George W. Bush is generally regarded as a mangler of the English language. What is overlooked is his mastery of emotional language--especially negatively charged emotional language--as a political tool. Take a closer look at his speeches and public utterances, and his political success turns out to be no surprise. It is the predictable result of the intentional use of language to dominate others.

President Bush, like many dominant personality types, uses dependency-creating language. He employs language of contempt and intimidation to shame others into submission and desperate admiration. While we tend to think of the dominator as using physical force, in fact most dominators use verbal abuse to control others. Abusive language has been a major theme of psychological researchers on marital problems, such as John Gottman, and of philosophers and theologians, such as Josef Pieper. But little has been said about the key role it has come to play in political discourse, and in such "hot media" as talk radio and television.

Bush uses several dominating linguistic techniques to induce surrender to his will. The first is *empty language*. This term refers to broad statements that are so abstract and mean so little that they are virtually impossible to oppose. Empty language is the emotional equivalent of empty calories. Just as we seldom question the content of potato chips while enjoying their pleasurable taste, recipients of empty language are usually distracted from examining the content of what they are hearing. Dominators use empty language to conceal faulty generalizations; to ridicule viable alternatives; to attribute negative motivations to others, thus making them appear contemptible; and to rename and "reframe" opposing viewpoints.

Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech contained thirty-nine examples of empty language. He used it to reduce complex problems to images that left the listener relieved that George W. Bush was in charge. Rather than explaining the relationship between malpractice insurance and skyrocketing healthcare costs, Bush summed up: "No one has ever been healed by a frivolous lawsuit." The multiple fiscal and monetary policy tools that can be used to stimulate an economy were downsized to: "The best and fairest way to make sure Americans have that money is not to tax it away in the first place." The controversial plan to wage another war on Iraq was simplified to: "We will answer every danger and every enemy that threatens the American people." In an earlier study, I found that in the 2000 presidential debates Bush used at least four times as many phrases containing empty language as

Carter, Reagan, Clinton, Bush Senior or Gore had used in their debates.

Another of Bush's dominant-language techniques is *personalization*. By personalization I mean localizing the attention of the listener on the speaker's personality. Bush projects himself as the only person capable of producing results. In his post-9/11 speech to Congress he said, "I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it. I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people." He substitutes his determination for that of the nation's. In the 2003 State of the Union speech he vowed, "I will defend the freedom and security of the American people." Contrast Bush's "I will not yield" etc. with John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

The word "you" rarely appears in Bush's speeches. Instead, there are numerous statements referring to himself or his personal characteristics--folksiness, confidence, righteous anger or determination--as the answer to the problems of the country. Even when Bush uses "we," as he did many times in the State of the Union speech, he does it in a way that focuses attention on himself. For example, he stated: "Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people, and the hopes of all mankind. And we accept this responsibility."

In an article in the January 16 *New York Review of Books*, Joan Didion highlighted Bush's high degree of personalization and contempt for argumentation in presenting his case for going to war in Iraq. As Didion writes: "I made up my mind," he had said in April, "that Saddam needs to go." This was one of many curious, almost petulant statements offered in lieu of actually presenting a case. *I've made up my mind, I've said in speech after speech, I've made myself clear.* The repeated statements became their own reason."

Poll after poll demonstrates that Bush's political agenda is out of step with most Americans' core beliefs. Yet the public, their electoral resistance broken down by empty language and persuaded by personalization, is susceptible to Bush's most frequently used linguistic technique: *negative framework*. A negative framework is a pessimistic image of the world. Bush creates and maintains negative frameworks in his listeners' minds with a number of linguistic techniques borrowed from advertising and hypnosis to instill the image of a dark and evil world around us. Catastrophic words and phrases are repeatedly drilled into the listener's head until the

opposition feels such a high level of anxiety that it appears pointless to do anything other than cower.

Psychologist Martin Seligman, in his extensive studies of "learned helplessness," showed that people's motivation to respond to outside threats and problems is undermined by a belief that they have no control over their environment. Learned helplessness is exacerbated by beliefs that problems caused by negative events are permanent; and when the underlying causes are perceived to apply to many other events, the condition becomes pervasive and paralyzing.

Bush is a master at inducing learned helplessness in the electorate. He uses pessimistic language that creates fear and disables people from feeling they can solve their problems. In his September 20, 2001, speech to Congress on the 9/11 attacks, he chose to increase people's sense of vulnerability: "Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen.... I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight.... Be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat." (Subsequent terror alerts by the FBI, CIA and Department of Homeland Security have maintained and expanded this fear of unknown, sinister enemies.)

Contrast this rhetoric with Franklin Roosevelt's speech delivered the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He said: "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.... There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces--with the unbounding determination of our people--we will gain the inevitable triumph--so help us God." Roosevelt focuses on an optimistic future rather than an ongoing threat to Americans' personal survival.

All political leaders must define the present threats and problems faced by the country before describing their approach to a solution, but the ratio of negative to optimistic statements in Bush's speeches and policy declarations is much higher, more pervasive and more long-lasting than that of any other President. Let's compare "crisis" speeches by Bush and Ronald Reagan, the President with whom he most identifies himself. In Reagan's October 27, 1983, televised address to the nation on the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, he used nineteen images of crisis and twenty-one images of optimism, evenly balancing optimistic and negative depictions. He limited his evaluation of the

problems to the past and present tense, saying only that "with patience and firmness we can bring peace to that strife-torn region--and make our own lives more secure." George W. Bush's October 7, 2002, major policy speech on Iraq, on the other hand, began with forty-four consecutive statements referring to the crisis and citing a multitude of possible catastrophic repercussions. The vast majority of these statements (for example: "Some ask how urgent this danger is to America and the world. The danger is already significant, and it only grows worse with time"; "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists") imply that the crisis will last into the indeterminate future. There is also no specific plan of action. The absence of plans is typical of a negative framework, and leaves the listener without hope that the crisis will ever end. Contrast this with Reagan, who, a third of the way into his explanation of the crisis in Lebanon, asked the following: "Where do we go from here? What can we do now to help Lebanon gain greater stability so that our Marines can come home? Well, I believe we can take three steps now that will make a difference."

To create a dependency dynamic between him and the electorate, Bush describes the nation as being in a perpetual state of crisis and then attempts to convince the electorate that it is powerless and that he is the only one with the strength to deal with it. He attempts to persuade people they must transfer power to him, thus crushing the power of the citizen, the Congress, the Democratic Party, even constitutional liberties, to concentrate all power in the imperial presidency and the Republican Party.

Bush's political opponents are caught in a fantasy that they can win against him simply by proving the superiority of their ideas. However, people do not support Bush for the power of his ideas, but out of the despair and desperation in their hearts. Whenever people are in the grip of a desperate dependency, they won't respond to rational criticisms of the people they are dependent on. They will respond to plausible and forceful statements and alternatives that put the American electorate back in touch with their core optimism. Bush's opponents must combat his dark imagery with hope and restore American vigor and optimism in the coming years. They should heed the example of Reagan, who used optimism against Carter and the "national malaise"; Franklin Roosevelt, who used it against Hoover and the pessimism induced by the Depression ("the only thing we have to fear is fear itself"); and Clinton (the "Man from Hope"), who used positive language against the senior Bush's lack of vision. This is the linguistic prescription for those who wish to retire Bush in 2004.

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