

January 2010

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Recommended Citation

Shepard, R. (2010). Explaining the Revolution: Vernacular Discourse and the Tipping Point in America's 2006 Midterm Election. *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal*, 37, 76-98.

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***Explaining the Revolution: Vernacular Discourse and the Tipping Point in
America's 2006 Midterm Election***

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ABSTRACT

The 2006 midterm election marked perhaps the first time that the American public held the Bush administration accountable for its controversial actions. Various explanations have been offered for the backlash, ranging from public concern about the war to disgust over sex scandals involving prominent conservatives. In this essay, through analysis of vernacular discourse appearing in letters to the editor from USA Today, I argue that the election results stemmed from Bush's weakening credibility – in respect to the dimensions of honesty, competence, and moderation – which limited the effectiveness of his rhetoric that was so powerful since September 11th.

America's midterm election of November 2006 resulted in a stunning victory for the Democratic Party. Democrats gained thirty-one seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, five seats in the Senate, and ultimately gained control of Congress for the first time since 1994. The election was also the first time that voters held President Bush accountable, albeit through punishing his political party, for his administration's perceived shortcomings. The reason for this backlash remains contested. When asked about a possible tipping point, some Republican strategists were quick to suggest that the election results signified only temporary frustration with the GOP. For instance, Karl Rove, just days after the election, reported, "Iraq mattered, [but] it was more frustration than it was an explicit call for withdrawal" (Allen, 2006). Instead, Rove argued in pointing to several political scandals unrelated to the administration's policies, "The profile of corruption in the exit polls was bigger than I'd expected. Abramoff, lobbying, Foley and Haggard added to the general distaste that people have for all things Washington, and it just reached critical mass" (Allen, 2006). Others disagreed with Rove. Arianna Huffington (2006), for example, claimed "there were three reasons why Democrats won, and they are Iraq, Iraq, and Iraq." Conservative journalist Robert Novak (2006) concurred, suggesting that opposition to the war had "produced a virulent anti-Republican mood." In reality, though, both of these evaluations are too simplistic.

Individual political crises themselves do not explain the outcome of the 2006 midterm election. The president's first six years in office were defined by numerous scandals and policy

failures. Whether it was an unpopular war, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, perceived infringement upon civil liberties, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, growing corporate and political corruption, an energy policy out of control, inaction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, or a growing gap between the rich and poor, there were a number of reasons for the public's diminishing faith in President Bush. Collectively, these shortcomings – in addition to economic conditions that created a bankruptcy boom and an electorate looking for someone to blame – seem to explain why the overall trajectory of public opinion during this period, captured by most polls, indicated a growing sense of frustration with the president after 2003. From record public approval ratings as high as eighty-eight percent in November 2001, according to the FOX News/Opinion Dynamics poll, the president's numbers dropped steadily to seventy percent by July 2002, sixty percent by January 2003, fifty percent by September 2003, and crashed to the lower forties and mid-thirties by the winter months of 2006.

While Bush's controversial policies and involvement in major scandals may have led to widespread frustration with his administration, his rhetoric kept him afloat. Several scholars have noted that Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric succeeded in maintaining strong support for his administration because his party controlled the framing of major political issues (Lakoff, 2004), and his discourse demonized his opponents and manipulated the public's fear (Bostdorff, 2003; Domke, 2004; Gunn, 2004; Ivie, 2004; Jewett & Lawrence, 2003; Lakoff & Frisch, 2006; Murphy, 2003). Consequently, Bush won his bid for reelection, and few people supported later calls for his impeachment or censuring. Although the president weathered the storm many times before, however, the election of 2006 signaled that his rhetoric, once amazingly successful, had finally stopped working. Since his political shortcomings alone do not explain this phenomenon, this essay offers an alternative explanation suggesting that the cumulative impact of Bush's political failures severely limited his rhetorical resources in convincing the public to stay the course with him and his party.

In this essay, through analysis of vernacular discourse in the form of letters to the editor from *USA Today*, I argue that President Bush's rhetoric became ineffective and that the Republican Party was subsequently held accountable by voters who grew increasingly nervous about an ideological agenda that pushed a conservative worldview apparently at any cost. At the root of the public backlash, and Bush's inability to continue successfully defending his actions, were growing problems with the president's credibility. These problems related to three dimensions of his ethos: honesty, competence, and moderation. Thus, public opinion of Bush went from idolization of the wartime leader to resentment of his involvement in scandals, and unyielding commitment to failed foreign and domestic policy. In short, it was not Bush's neo-conservative worldview that led the electorate to punish Republicans, rather it was the growing belief among voters that his destructive leadership style would doom the country. With Bush's ethos damaged, doubts clearly grew about the agenda that he and his party represented.

My argument develops, first, with a discussion about the importance of understanding public opinion through vernacular discourse. Additionally, I explicate how letters to the editor, in particular, might help critics understand the shift in any kind of public opinion, but especially

about the Bush administration in 2006. Second, in analyzing four important months of letters to the editor published in *USA Today*, I trace a trajectory of public opinion focused on Bush's credibility. I argue that the public, supportive overall in May 2003 within a year became more concerned about the president's honesty and competence in dealing with Iraq. By October 2005, I contend, this concern transformed into clear frustration with all aspects of Bush's credibility. Analysis of letters from October 2006 demonstrates further that perceptions of the administration's unrealistic commitment to a failed agenda had turned most Americans against the president. Finally, I close with a discussion of the implications of this study.

Vernacular Discourse and Tipping Points in Public Opinion

Explaining how the Bush administration's rhetoric became ineffective in evading responsibility requires an understanding of how the majority of Americans eventually grew more concerned about the leadership of the former hero of the post-9/11 world. Thus, this section explicates how theories about "tipping points" in social and political movements are helpful in comprehending sudden swings in public opinion similar to what occurred leading up to November 2006, and also how analysis of what Gerard Hauser and others called "vernacular discourse" gives critics greater access to the complicated thoughts of the politically engaged citizens behind these swings. Additionally, I suggest that letters to the editor in major newspapers are an excellent source – despite their shortcomings – for reading vernacular discourse regarding hotly debated issues, and I then describe the nature of the texts analyzed in the rest of this essay.

One way of analyzing sudden changes in public opinion is through the theory of the tipping point, which has probably been most clearly presented by Malcom Gladwell. A tipping point, Gladwell (2000) argued, "is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point" (p. 12). Tipping points are what lead to the mysterious emergence of any social trend, including fashion fads, the surge in the number of teenage smokers, the rise and fall of crime waves, or strong opinions about government. According to Gladwell, these trends are similar to epidemics, for "ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do" (p. 7). Because beliefs and attitudes are contagious, therefore, social trends can be caused by little events, and spread quickly. Explaining the complicated causes behind trends in public opinion and behavior, Gladwell identified three factors that lead to tipping points. First, in describing what he called "the law of the few," Gladwell suggested that tipping points are triggered by the actions of just a handful of people. "When it comes to epidemics," Gladwell noted, "a tiny percentage of people do the majority of the work" (p. 19). Certain people have enormous power because they are perceived as being knowledgeable, energetic, and sociable (p. 21). Second, in explaining "the stickiness factor," Gladwell stated that tipping points are caused when messages are made memorable, usually through simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information (p. 25). Third, Gladwell highlighted the importance of context, and suggested that people often drastically alter their behavior in response to the smallest changes in their immediate situation (p. 29).

Tipping point theory is especially useful in the study of social movements because it sometimes clarifies when and how certain ideas mobilize the masses. Rhetoric scholars have described the development of social movements in several ways. Leland Griffin (1952), for instance, suggested that movements start with a period of inception in which certain sentiments “flower into public notice” or when a controversial event “immediately creates a host of aggressor rhetoricians” who initiate a movement (p. 186). According to Griffin, this stage is followed by a second characterized by “rhetorical crisis” when the movement succeeds in disturbing the balance of the status quo, and a third stage characterized by a period of consummation in which the aggressor rhetoricians abandon their efforts (p. 186). In expanding this framework, Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2001) identified five stages in the development of movements. Movements, they argued, start with a genesis stage in which restless individuals convene because of shared concerns about problems with some institution, followed by a stage of social unrest when the group becomes more visible to the public. The third stage, marked by enthusiastic mobilization, occurs when the movement is highly active and optimistic, and gains legitimacy from widespread support. According to Stewart, Smith, and Denton, social movements then enter a fourth stage in which they maintain a quieter, more stable presence that is eventually followed by a final stage bringing their termination.

Interestingly, though rhetoric scholars can agree on the basic life cycle of social movements, they admit that they cannot always identify the key moments that trigger the earliest stages. As Stewart and his colleagues suggested, “We rarely know when a social movement begins – only that it evolved in particular ways” (p. 130). At most, these scholars noted, at some point “individuals view an imperfection as a serious problem that is likely to grow more severe unless appropriate institutions address it quickly and earnestly” (p. 130). It is usually not until a “triggering incident” that the “generally unorganized, ideologically uncertain, and barely visible social movement” advances to the next stage (p. 132). According to these scholars, this triggering incident is not always possible to identify “until we have time to observe the flow of history” (p. 148). In this respect, identifying tipping points is helpful in understanding the progression of social movements, and this identification is possible with certain methods of analysis that provide detailed focus on the thoughts of the politically engaged.

In determining the tipping point that led to anti-government attitudes and a Democratic victory in the 2006 midterm election, this essay focuses on public opinion as it emerged in vernacular discourse. There are three assumptions that guide the study of vernacular rhetoric. First, despite ongoing questions regarding how “the people” directly influence their political system, the study of vernacular voices emphasizes the idea that public opinion still matters. As Hauser (2004) stated

Even if democratic leaders do not actually rely on public discussion of the people's business to guide their political conduct, they treasure the political cachet of appeals to ‘the people,’ which reflects acknowledgment that their acts in some way require authorization. (p. 2)

Second, scholars calling for study of vernacular rhetoric also hold that traditional approaches to public opinion usually regurgitate the findings of polls and oversimplify the feelings of everyday citizens. On the limitations of polls, Hauser (1999) suggested, “Taken at face value they can be deceiving; weighed alone they offer a limited and sometimes superficial understanding of publics and what they believe” (p. 4). Polls offer only an abstract representation of public sentiment. Hauser cautioned, “We do not experience this public; we cannot interact with it, question its reasoning, or expect it to respond to our own reasoning” (p. 5). Third, as an alternative to traditional approaches to public opinion, analysis of vernacular rhetoric allows scholars to study the public sphere through observing “discourse as it actually transpires” (p. 109). These “vernacular dialogues, from which we extrapolate and interpret public opinions, discursively constitute their participants’ common understandings of reality” (p. 109). Vernacular voices represent not the public as “a general reference to a body of disinterested members of a society” (p. 14), but publics as “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (p. 31). According to Hauser, scholars who fail to study public dialogue “lose the narratives in which opinions are contextualized and which allow us to interpret the meaning of volunteered judgments” (p. 110). Attempting to capture these complex narratives, many recent studies have analyzed vernacular discourse in focus groups (Carlin et al., 2005), the internet and its many genres (Carlin et al., 2005; Gronbeck, 2004; Killoran, 2004; Schifino, 2006), school board meetings (McCormick, 2003), poems (Blitefield, 2004; Logan, 2004), public discussion clubs (Simons, 2004), talk radio (Eberly, 2004), and the courtroom (Dobyns, 2004).

Through examining letters to the editor in a politically moderate, nationally circulated newspaper, this essay answers the critical call for the study of discourse as it actually transpires. Letters to the editor have been chosen for the basis of my analysis because they are one of the best available sources to determine what politically active citizens – or what McGee (1975) refers to as “the people” – think about the president and the governing parties. Letters to the editor are notable because they are ripe with authentic opinion. Unlike those who respond to polls, authors of letters to the editor have more freedom to articulate their position on a variety of issues. More importantly, because letters to the editor appear consistently in newspapers, opinions may be compared over a period of time. As with polls, letters to the editor can indicate when opinions have changed, but unlike polls they contain explanations for why that change of heart has occurred.

Of course, letters to the editor have their own limitations in articulating public opinion. Previous studies have suggested that letters pages are a “concrete instance of mediated public debate” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 22) providing a window into the thoughts of a handful of writers who do not necessarily reflect general public opinion (Grey & Brown, 1970; Nielsen, 2010; Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; 2002a; 2002b). Letters often fail to represent “young adults, retired people, the unemployed, and those with less than average incomes” (Nielsen, p. 25), as well as many ethnic minorities and in some cases women (Singletary, 1976; Singletary & Cowling, 1979; Sparks & Perez, 1991; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a). Despite editors’ best intentions,

sometimes letters are penned by special interest groups (Nielsen, 2010; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Reader, 2008; Richardson & Franklin, 2004). Additionally, “Editors have to sift through what is sometimes a trickle, usually a stream, and, depending on events, occasionally a flash flood of submissions, and construct from this the number of printed pages the organizational standards require” (Nielsen, p. 26). Editors therefore apply various subjective rules to select letters, pertaining to news value, relevance, entertainment, brevity, authority, and fairness (Nielsen, 2010; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b). Although some letters are not printed due to editorial bias (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a), some studies have suggested that “rejected letters do not constitute a treasure trove of genuinely deliberative interventions screened out by shallow media gatekeepers. In general, they are much the same as what is printed, only longer, less well written, and more predictable” (Nielsen, p. 32). Moreover, Raeymaeckers (2005) noted, while “some editorial interventions are far from innocent,” “most editors confine themselves to shortening the readers’ letters and to touching up the vocabulary and grammar” (p. 219). Thus, while letters do not live up to ideal visions of deliberative democracy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b), they are still regarded by many scholars as strong indicators of issues the public cares about (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Hynds, 1991).

In the analysis that follows, I examine letters to the editor that appeared in *USA Today*. *USA Today* is an appropriate source because at the time of the 2006 election it had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the country with twice the number of subscribers as the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*, and nearly one million more subscribers than *The New York Times*. Its circulation meant that letters to the editor appearing in the newspaper had a greater chance of representing beliefs across a greater region. Additionally, *USA Today* has been recognized as the major newspaper “closest to the center” in terms of journalism and public opinion, according to a study led by political scientist Tim Groseclose (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005, p. 1191; see also Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006, pp. 16-17).

Explaining the Democratic Revolution of 2006

Bush’s rhetoric ultimately failed to protect his administration and his party, I argue, because of growing public concern about his leadership style. In the following analysis, I trace the public’s backlash to Bush’s leadership through four months of letters to the editor that appeared in *USA Today* between May 2003 and October 2006. In particular, my focus on letters to the editor from the months of May 2003 and 2004, and October 2005 and 2006 is based on a number of observations. Tracking the public’s changing opinion of the Bush administration requires a comparison of those sentiments about the president when the public was largely enamored with him, and later when he was perceived as being a poor leader. Although it was not expected that each month’s letters would perfectly represent public opinion, it was assumed that themes related to issues where “feelings run unusually high” would produce a “rough correspondence between the aggregated opinions expressed in letters to the editor and those elicited in opinion polls” (Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992, p. 944). Thus, May 2003 was selected as

a month to represent the favorable impressions of Bush. In that month, according to the FOX News/Opinion Dynamics poll, the president celebrated an approval rating of sixty-five percent, and was generally held in high regard after announcing, under the now infamous “Mission Accomplished” banner, an end to major combat operations in Iraq. May 2004 was chosen because it was one of the first months in which the president’s approval ratings, as well as support for the war in Iraq, dipped under fifty percent. October 2005 was selected because the month represented the average of Bush’s approval ratings in the range of forty to forty-five percent. Finally, October 2006 was included because it was close to the election, and because it represented a period in which less than forty-percent of Americans approved of the president.

Overall, 711 letters were examined, and 216 were selected for more careful readings based on their direct references to the president, his administration, or his political party. Of those relevant letters, each month’s contributions were analyzed by the author for themes they had in common, related mostly to their praise or criticism of multiple aspects of Bush’s leadership. Notably, most of the letters could be identified as belonging in one category or the other. When the letters for each month were compared, an intriguing story emerged. As the following sections illustrate, a tipping point occurring between October 2005 and October 2006 led some of the president’s traditional supporters to alienate their leader. The tipping point came after a gradual slide in the president’s credibility with the public. Americans in May 2003, I argue, were skeptical about the president’s leadership and voiced concern about his lack of moderation in economic policies, but criticism was outweighed by patriotic fervor that called for an assumption of Bush’s competence and honesty. By May 2004 the president’s supporters still outnumbered his critics, but there was a growing sense of concern over the honesty and competence behind the war effort. It took only a year for the public, upset about Iraq and Hurricane Katrina, to express serious frustration with all aspects of the administration’s credibility. Analysis of letters from October 2006 demonstrate that due to perceptions of failure in Iraq, and the addition of the Ted Haggard and Mark Foley sex scandals on top of previous crises, the public had lost its trust in Republican leadership.

May 2003: A Time of Support

Of the 208 letters to the editor appearing in *USA Today* for the month of May 2003, forty-six concerned the president, his administration, or his political party. Of these forty-six, sixteen letters dealt mostly with idiosyncratic issues. Close examination of the thirty others uncovered four types of comments regarding the president’s credibility. With the conflict in Iraq going his way, and the end of major military operations announced, May 2003 represented a period of widespread support for the president. Some Americans criticized him for being dishonest and others disliked his position on tax cuts, but most writers praised Bush’s leadership.

High praise of the president’s leadership. In all, twelve of the letters concerning President Bush evaluated his leadership. Six letters expressed that he and his administration were

manipulative, though they were split in the degree to which they were critical. Little (2003), for instance, critiqued Bush for using the media to cover his theatrical landing on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. Branscomb (2003), in discussing the administration's manipulation of fear, drew a parallel between Nazi Germany and the United States. With less intensity, three other letters (Henley, 2003; Goodenow, 2003; Hege, 2003) suggested that the president lied to the American people on multiple occasions. However, letters praising Bush's leadership, while not necessarily dwarfing the critics in number, were longer, more detailed, and more passionate.

Many Americans supported unconditional backing of the president because they were enamored with his decisive leadership. In all, six of the letters from May 2003 hailed Bush for his unwavering commitment. Beck (2003), for instance, wrote, "I'm a senior citizen, and it has been a long time since I've witnessed a leader like Bush, who says what he means and is comfortable about carrying out his word" (p. 10A). Rokavec (2003) added

The president had the courage to take a stand on an unpopular issue, the war with Iraq, [and] I am glad to be living in a country where my leader cares more about the rights of people than leaving behind a legacy. (p. 10A)

Addressing Bush's skeptics, Chartrand (2003) stated, "I strongly support the Bush administration's noble efforts to secure our nation, and I am grateful the president has stood firm in the face of criticism" (p. 14A). Thus, Bush's supporters praised him for his competence and moderation in making tough decisions.

Criticism of the president's fiscal policy. Beyond the skepticism concerning his honesty and trustworthiness, nine out of ten letters regarding Bush's economic policy expressed resentment toward him for proposing excessive tax cuts. Busto (2003) argued that the president lacked understanding of "how most Americans struggle" (p. 11A). Many others complained that the tax cuts were making the rich even richer (Gruener, 2003; Light, 2003; Moss, 2003), while the lower class faced cuts to several important social programs (Lewis, 2003; Luciano, 2003; Wilson, 2003). Additionally, some letters showed concern over a growing deficit perceived as harmful to America's future (Hewitt, 2003). Therefore, despite support being high for Bush in May 2003, there was some frustration over his lack of moderation in fiscal matters.

Defining post-9/11 citizenship. Many letters in May 2003 suggested that the country's political environment was not accepting of Bush's opponents. Six of the forty-six letters to the editor from May 2003 defined ideal citizens as those who unconditionally supported the president. The letters argued that most criticism of the president was unfair, and that it originated from bitter liberals. Rokavec (2003) exclaimed, "I am so tired of people putting down President Bush" (p. 14A). Aukskalnis (2003) referred to critics as having "sour grapes" (p. 12A). Other letters argued that those critical of the president needed to move on. For example, Barba (2003) demanded, "Get over it. More than 70% of the country approves of Bush's performance, and I know several people who voted for Gore who now proclaim they are happy Bush is president" (p. 14A). Some labeled Sen. Robert Byrd's criticism of Bush landing on the U.S.S. Abraham

Lincoln as disgraceful (Taft, 2003), while others more explicitly recommended that Byrd just suck it up and “honor our military men and women” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 10A).

Faith in America’s war in Iraq. The great deal of support that the president enjoyed in May 2003 makes sense because opinion regarding the war was largely positive at the time. Although there were not many letters in May 2003 addressing the war in Iraq, the three that were printed illustrated that critics were in the minority. Just one of the three was against the war. Santee (2003), in referencing the missing weapons of mass destruction, stated, “So it turns out we were not fighting and dying for our freedom after all, but instead we were there fighting and dying for the freedom of Iraqis” (p. 14A). However, public frustration over the missing WMD was far from reaching its climax. The remaining two letters regarding Iraq showed that many Americans were content because they believed that the war was over. Paulson (2003) suggested, “With the war in Iraq ending, it’s time for Americans of every background to get busy doing whatever possible to get this economy moving forward” (p. 10A). Additionally, Rogers (2003) confessed, “I am glad the war in Iraq is close to an end. I had thought it was going to take years to finish. I also thought it would cost countless dollars and lives. Fortunately, I was wrong” (p. 14A). Public opinion concerning Bush’s honesty, competence, and moderation, then, was high especially because the war was seen as coming to a successful conclusion.

May 2004: When the Public Began to Shift

In the year following May 2003, the world was confronted with the awful truth that the war in Iraq was failing. In the summer of 2003, the president was accused of exaggerating military intelligence in making his case for the initial invasion. Additionally, the insurgency once described by Donald Rumsfeld as “small networks of ten to twenty people” was wreaking havoc on the Middle Eastern state (“Rumsfeld blames,” 2003). Consequently, letters to the editor in May 2004 demonstrated a slight shift in public opinion and marked the early formation of a trajectory focused on the president’s credibility. Of the 178 letters to the editor from May 2004, sixty-eight concerned the president. Of these sixty-eight, thirteen dealt with a number of unrelated issues. The fifty-five others showed a new direction in public opinion. In short, many writers were becoming a little more skeptical about Bush’s honesty and competence, especially after the Abu Ghraib scandal, and many were also concerned about Bush’s handling of the war in Iraq. Despite the shift in opinion, the president’s overall leadership was still widely praised.

Citizenship revisited. While letters in May 2003 called for unconditional support of the president in a time of war, the mood changed a year later. Of the sixty-eight letters, five discussed the role of citizens in the post-9/11 world. A few suggested that questioning Bush’s policies was acceptable. Powers (2004) thanked *USA Today* for running photos of fallen soldiers so that the public could “understand that they are the ones who have paid war’s price” (p. 12A). Carbonaro (2004), in justifying criticism of the war, contended “I have every sympathy and

concern for the soldiers and their families, but I also think they should not have been sent in harm's way in the first place" (p. 12A). Other writers (Moses, 2004; Nelson, 2004; Sabater, 2004) attacked *USA Today* for publishing photographs of fallen soldiers, and described the coverage as sensationalism at its worst. It is notable, however, that Bush's supporters were no longer labeling all negative criticism as crazy liberal banter.

Public concern over Abu Ghraib. Over a third of the letters from May 2004 pertaining to Bush and the GOP related to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Although opinions were divided on the issue, the letters demonstrated how political crises started to erode the public's confidence in the executive office. Eleven letters expressed support for the president and the troops in Iraq. Three arguments were apparent in these letters. First, some (Overholser, 2004) believed that the media was exaggerating the story. Second, other letters (Byers, 2004; Polfus, 2004; Walsh, 2004) argued that the crimes were committed by a few bad apples and had little to do with the Bush administration. Third, at least four of the letters (DiPentima, 2004; Novakovich, 2004; Quillen, 2004; Welch, 2004) characterized those tortured as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers who deserved the rough treatment. In short, these eleven letters suggested that the president was not at fault for the prisoner abuse.

Nearly half of the letters regarding Abu Ghraib, though, argued that the Bush administration was responsible for the crisis. At least four (Burriss, 2004; Kaminski, 2004; Mastrangelo, 2004; Miller, 2004) stated that the abuse was the result of poor leadership and reflected larger problems with the administration's lack of honesty and competence. Miller, for example, stated, "[Bush's] claim that only a few U.S. soldiers are to blame is wrong" (p. 14A). Mastrangelo, in response to Bush's claim that he did not receive warnings about ongoing mistreatment of prisoners, suggested, "To think that a Cabinet member could keep such a critical matter from Bush raises serious questions about Bush's control and decisions in Iraq" (p. 12A). Four other letters (Gary, 2004; Gorman, 2004; Reed, 2004; Wiseman, 2004) implied that there was, or was going to be, a cover-up. Gary, for instance, complained that the corrective action promised by the government was too lenient. He stated

As usual, the military brass doesn't get it. A reprimand is what I gave my daughter's boyfriend when I found that he'd been driving carelessly with her in the car. What I'd like to read is that the offenders got the severest form of prison time. (p. 14A)

Finally, a few other letters suggested that the president's neglect of the scandal would fuel the cause of the terrorists and lead to more violence. On this point, Ingalls (2004) suggested, "Extremists in the Arab world – already inflamed over our prolonged occupation of an Arab country – will see this as ample reason to muster retaliation" (p. 11A). Thus, public criticism in response to Abu Ghraib illustrated that many Americans were willing to point fingers at Bush.

Growing frustration over Iraq. The number of letters generally addressing the war in Iraq increased substantially from May 2003 to May 2004. Of the sixty-eight letters regarding the Bush administration, twenty-five took a clear position on the war. The letters were divided

evenly. Half of the letters supported the president and the war. Some of those who wrote argued that the media coverage of the war was heavily biased against the president (Johnson, 2004; Ringling, 2004; Wrigley, 2004). Others (Larue, 2004) blamed Iraqis for the war's failure to bring security to their country. A few more letters (Moutos, 2004; Warford, 2004) argued that the sacrifice in Iraq had been too great to pull out, regardless of the financial cost. In the same vein, many of these letters, six in all, claimed that the security of the world depended on success in Iraq. Summarizing this logic, Scott (2004) concluded, "Like it or not, we are fighting a religious war. If we do not keep the pressure on the terrorists, we will be inviting more attacks against the American civilian population" (p. 12A). Thus letters well into May 2004 called for the president to stay the course at any cost.

Nevertheless, just as many letters reflected frustration with the war. These letters blamed Bush for failures in Iraq, and made it clear that his credibility with a large portion of the public was severely damaged. Some critics accused the president of lying to the American people about evidence of WMD. Sartori (2006) contended, "From day one, our incompetent president has lied to us every step of the way to get the U.S. into a war we had no business entering into in the first place" (p. 14A). In labeling the sacrifice as wasteful, other critics suggested that the mounting death toll and potential civil war in Iraq were signs that American forces needed to come home. Bulmer (2004) clearly presented this perspective, writing, "We need to get out of Iraq now. Too many lives are being lost. The people there hate us, and the Muslim world will never embrace our form of democracy" (p. 20A). Admitting to excessive loss, even some Republicans decided that the war had failed. Bulmer (2004), for example, confessed, "As a lifelong Republican, I've always supported the party's candidate and policies. At one time, I supported President Bush. But all of that changed with the beheading of American hostage Nick Berg" (p. 20A). As another self-identified member of the GOP, Roberts (2004) called for the sacrifice to end, stating, "There is also no question as to who committed atrocities on prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq -- we did. Where are the courageous Republican Party members now?" (p. 12A). Finally, some of the letters expressed frustration, not only in regards to the death toll, but with the president's commitment to the same old strategies. This criticism accused Bush of failing to draft an effective long-term plan for the war. As Jones (2004) argued, "Staying the course is not the correct action. We haven't liberated anyone. If anything, we have brought more risk to our own country" (p. 8A). In short, although letters against the war were not yet outnumbering those in support, the public's opposition by May 2004 was growing.

Continued approval of Bush's leadership. While the public was becoming more frustrated with Bush, most of his traditional supporters still rallied behind him. Of the eleven letters addressing Bush's leadership, eight expressed that he was an excellent president. Morrow (2004) claimed, "I believe Bush will go down as the greatest president in my lifetime. He has courage and bravado, and he sticks to right over wrong, regardless of the corruption of the rest of the world" (p. 20A). Additional letters (Loran, 2004; Minchin, 2004; Sterzinger, 2004; Sullivan,

2004) were not as optimistic, but still hailed the president for doing his best in a world that had become more complex after September 11th.

October 2005: The Rise of Negative Public Opinion

The seventeen months following May 2004 brought more crises to Bush's doorstep. The war in Iraq was getting bloodier, and gas prices were skyrocketing. Additionally, the federal government's botched emergency relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina opened the Bush administration to additional charges of incompetent leadership. Following the firing of FEMA director Michael Brown, praised just days earlier for his hard work, President Bush in his address from Jackson Square on September 15th accepted responsibility for the disaster. The apology did little to stop Bush's public relations problem. By October 2005, letters regarding Bush focused narrowly on a few issues, and were far more negative than those letters from May 2003 and 2004. Of the 166 letters, forty-seven concerned the president, though twelve letters dealt with idiosyncratic political matters. The majority of the letters dealt with the themes of Iraq and Bush's leadership, and voiced strong concern about his honesty, competence, and moderation.

Vanishing support for the war. Of the thirty-five letters regarding Bush, nine related to the war in Iraq. Of those nine, only three letters were supportive. Clifford (2005) reminded the world that "The media have too easily forgotten that the invasion was called 'Operation Iraqi Freedom, not 'Find those WMDs'" (p. 14A). Shurdut (2005) warned that withdrawal would encourage insurgents "to take over the Muslim world and then Israel" (p. 19A). Levy (2005) characterized the mission as a success because a despot had been removed, elections held, and a constitution approved. However, the letters published that were clearly against the war were double in number.

Most letters from October 2005 suggested that the president had lost credibility with the public. Scharpf (2005), for example, in countering Bush's comparison of the war in Iraq to World War II, painted the sacrifice in other terms, concluding, "When I think of our involvement in Iraq, another less flattering conflict comes to mind: It starts with a 'V' and ends with a 'nam'" (p. 14A). Others shared this view of the occupation as too long and costly. Gozlyn (2005) wrote that "tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed or wounded because of our failure" and that "an apology . . . to the world would be a big first step toward diffusing widespread anger and contempt over the Bush administration's legacy of torture, chaos, arrogant abuse of power and unnecessary loss of life" (p. 20A). Regarding Bush's competence, Berg (2005) argued that the war failed, "because the Bush administration lacked the common sense to take into account the factional rivalries that threaten to split Iraq apart" (p. 19A). Despite failures, Bush pressed on, much to the chagrin of many Americans. As O'Leary (2005) argued, the illegal excursion into Iraq and undying commitment to the war made some feel like "fascism [was] just around the corner" (p. 14A).

Lost hope in Bush's overall leadership. All ten letters directly evaluating Bush's leadership in October 2005 criticized him for being dishonest, incompetent, and overly committed to failed policy. The most frequent criticism was that Bush, dishonest in his desire to work with international coalitions, too often went it alone, leaving his constituents to pay the price. Galal (2005) argued that Bush consistently undermined international law, treaties, and conventions. After Michael Brown's mishaps following Hurricane Katrina, Larrabee (2005) called on the government to closely monitor all of Bush's future nominations. As for Bush's other controversial decisions, Beavers (2005) and Gilmore (2005) concluded that the president was driven by partisan motives and that he did not have the best interest of all Americans at heart. Bush was labeled an extremist, even by some who allegedly voted for him. Knapp (2005) admitted

I'm one diehard conservative who has had enough of President Bush. He came to power as the 'great unifier,' [but he] has never had the judgment, and he has now shown that he doesn't . . . have the political savvy to be an effective leader. (p. 20A)

In commenting on Bush's tendency to push a one-party agenda, some writers implied that he worked with others only when forced. In regards to environmental policy, Fineberg (2005) suggested, "[Suddenly], he's changing his tune, saying we need to conserve. Why? [Not] because he has had an epiphany and become a true believer. No, it's only his plummeting approval ratings that have him switching messages" (p. 20A). Galloway (2005), who claimed that high fuel costs were hurting middle class families, agreed with this claim, calling Bush's conservation talk "pathetic pandering" (p. 12A).

October 2006: The Tipping Point Becomes Apparent

Letters from October 2006 illustrated that support for the president had dwindled to its lowest point ever. Of the 159 letters printed that month, fifty-five concerned Bush. Notably, the letters accused the president of many kinds of failure. For instance, twelve letters discussed Bush's immigration policy, with eleven evaluating the administration negatively. Of seven letters concerning health care in America, six complained that the current system left too many in despair. Additionally, six letters discussed the growing threat of Korea, which at the time was testing nuclear weapons. Five of those letters argued that the president's pursuit of Iraq had made the world a more dangerous place. Throughout all of the letters were three common themes carrying over from previous months that suggested Bush, just a month from the midterm elections, had lost much of his credibility with voters.

Failure in Iraq. By October 2006, letters to the editor in *USA Today* were almost entirely negative about the war in Iraq. Of the fifteen letters, only three were supportive of Bush. In the twelve letters against the war, many wrote that Bush's commitment to a failed strategy in Iraq was dangerous. In short, with Bush being described as obsessed, stubborn, and too powerful, he was under direct attack for lacking moderation. As some concluded, the Bush administration's

relentless commitment to fight terrorists abroad had weakened the country. For example, Stosine (2006) stated, “Our armed forces are strained to a point where it's becoming clear to our growing, and increasingly united, enemies that we are likely losing the ability to ‘police’ or ‘enforce’ anything” (p. 12A). The root of the problem was Bush’s reluctance to change his strategy in the war on terrorism, some noted. Abernathy (2006), stating a popular belief, suggested, “We need to get out of Iraq now, so we can fight the war on terrorism” (p. 19A). Pointing out that Bush’s agenda had been tragically taken to the end of the line, Banks (2006) declared, “With a foreign policy that has undermined the credibility and security of the United States, it is no longer politically . . . acceptable to rubber stamp President Bush's call to ‘stay the course’ with regard to Iraq” (p. 12A). The solution in dealing with such a flawed leader, as many letters suggested, was to limit Bush’s power in the future. Kimberly (2006), for instance, stated, “We cannot do anything to change Bush and his administration. We can, however, deprive them of the power they now have and let new members of Congress attempt to clean up the mess they have made” (p. 19A).

Political scandals further damage GOP credibility. Karl Rove and Republican strategists were right in concluding that the sex scandals involving Haggard and Foley influenced voters in the days before the election. However, the six letters regarding the matter suggested that the scandals only solidified popular opinion that the Bush administration and Republicans were secretive, corrupt, and out of touch. Upset about the Foley scandal, Blue (2006) remarked, “Then we learn that the congressional leadership knew of the allegations months ago. That is not just appalling; it is intolerable” (p. 12A). Vermaas (2006) added

If this were just about Foley himself, it might not have many repercussions for the GOP. But what is potentially fatal for the party's hopes in November is an alleged cover-up, where Republican congressional members potentially knew about this and did nothing for months. (p. 12A)

Galindo (2006), like many others, called for accountability and stated, “For all those who want our votes, stand before us and report what you did, what you learned and what you will do differently in the future. Tell us how you will be personally accountable to your constituents” (p. 12A).

Overall frustration with Republican leadership. Just weeks before the midterm elections, four letters evaluating Republican leadership characterized the majority as corrupt and out of touch. Ruga (2006), in writing about the GOP’s handling of a number of crises, argued, “Leaders who are this out of touch when confronted with facts that should lead reasonable people to obvious conclusions cannot be trusted to reach appropriate conclusions when faced with more complicated facts” (p. 21A). Stating what most independent voters likely felt, Ruga concluded, “I vote Democrat and Republican. I'll have to be much more careful now before I pull a Republican lever” (p. 21A). Echoing this frustration, Fredericks (2006), a military veteran who supported the war in Iraq, admitted

I have no confusion about why I was in Iraq, [but] I am confused about a Congress that votes based on personal self-interest, that can't seem to control our domestic borders and that spends more time trying to get elected with mud-slinging than selflessly defending the nation. (p. 21A)

Decker (2006) in attacking Republican spending during the campaign as evidence of the party's ties to big business, asked, "Where is all the money coming from to pay for this disparity in ads? It comes from the pharmaceutical industry, the oil industry, the military/industrial complex, Wall Street, etc. In short, it is those who profit from Republican policies" (p. 12A). Thus, by October 2006 voters appeared increasingly agitated by the numerous signs of government corruption.

Conclusion

After a momentous election like that in 2006, it is not enough to analyze a sudden shift in public opinion by regurgitating data from exit polls. Public opinion is more complex than pundits pretend, and throughout this essay I have argued for the importance of examining vernacular discourse to understand the cause of tipping points. The tide of public opinion that swept so many Republicans out of office in November 2006, and cleared the way for Democrats to win the presidency in 2008, was not simply a reaction to the war in Iraq, or even a response to the sex scandals or lobbying corruption involving prominent conservatives. The election was a referendum on a presidential administration suffering a credibility crisis that was calcified sometime after Bush's reelection in 2004.

This essay has several implications. Above all, it offers an explanation for the outcome of the 2006 midterm election that moves beyond simple punditry. The public turned on Republicans, and Bush's rhetoric failed to maintain the support he enjoyed as a wartime leader, when the federal government's failures after Hurricane Katrina raised serious concerns about the Bush administration's competence, honesty, and moderation. Letters from May 2003 and 2004 showed that while Bush was losing popularity, a good number of politically active Americans still approved of his leadership. Eventually, however, the majority of letter writers characterized Bush as out of touch, and attacked the president for his deep commitment to poor domestic and foreign policy in addition to his involvement in several scandals.

Ultimately, the letters to the editor analyzed in this essay support the basic tenets of Gladwell's theory of tipping points. In respect to the rule of the few, the difference between letters from May 2003 and later months was that moderate voters and even Republicans by October 2005 had apparently joined the attacks on Bush. As White (2005) elaborated, "Since winning reelection, Bush continued to shed independent and moderate support. On nearly every major issue presidential disapproval among independents and moderates [was] higher than the national average." This was especially apparent when Republican candidates making public appearances tried to distance themselves from the Bush administration. Efforts to keep away from Bush were so strategic, Epstein (2006) reported, that all photographs of the president were removed from most Republican candidates' websites, and fundraising alongside Bush occurred

only behind closed doors. In short, the dive in public approval started once conservatives joined moderates in criticizing Bush.

In respect to what Gladwell referred to as the power of context, the letters became more negative only after Bush encountered crises in addition to the failures surrounding the war in Iraq. The administration's credibility was so severely damaged, especially after Hurricane Katrina, that Bush lost the benefits of being a wartime president. Instead of being given the benefit of the doubt time and time again, the public began linking Bush's political shortcomings to his character. As White (2005) claimed, the country eventually had two images of the president:

The first is his 2001 stance atop the ruins of the World Trade Center holding a bullhorn and telling a crowd of firefighters: "I hear you; the rest of the world hears you; and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." A second image [then came] into focus: Bush's viewing of the Hurricane Katrina damage from the luxury of his Air Force One cabin high atop the immense suffering in the city of New Orleans below.

Growing perceptions that the Bush administration's failures were mounting clearly caused the president and the GOP to lose key moderate voters.

In addition to advancing a more detailed explanation for the backlash against Republicans in 2006, this essay shows that rhetorical studies concerning public opinion can benefit immensely from analyzing vernacular discourse. Relying on public approval ratings to determine effectiveness of rhetoric is incomplete because polls do not report the underlying reasons behind the opinions of politically active citizens. Analysis of vernacular discourse, unlike reliance on poll numbers, uncovers what influential individuals think when they are allowed to speak their minds. More importantly, study of vernacular discourse allows the critic to comprehend how and why public opinion about any particular issue shifts over time. Although these texts cannot point to a single cause for some phenomenon, and are not perfectly representative of the electorate's concerns, they provide a more detailed picture of the public's thoughts than most conventional methods of engaging public opinion.

Finally, this essay is important because it functions as a case study that may be useful in explaining similar outcomes in future elections. If predictions about the 2010 midterm election are accurate, anti-government attitudes will threaten the Democratic Party's majorities in the United States House of Representatives and the Senate. If 2010 indeed becomes another 1994 or 2006, critics should not be so quick to point to controversial issues like healthcare reform or the stimulus bill to explain the results. Barack Obama, much like George W. Bush, has been effectively described by his opponents, and an echoing media, as a partisan leader who threatens the long-term stability of the country. Conservative attempts to label him the "Teleprompter President" committed to a disastrous liberal – and even socialist – agenda appear to be catching on. As with Bush, Obama finds himself in a credibility crisis that could easily reach a tipping point with the electorate before the 2010 election. Keeping a close watch on the vernacular discourse of politically engaged citizens might tell communication scholars a lot if the

Democratic revolution of 2006 is replaced by a revolution of the Republican kind in the coming months.

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Author's Note

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Central States Communication Association's 2010 conference in Cincinnati where it won the top student paper prize in the Rhetorical Theory and Criticism Interest Group. The author wishes to thank Dr. Robert Rowland for reading earlier drafts, and the anonymous reviewers for their contributions. Correspondence to: Ryan Shepard, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Kansas, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd, Rm 102, Lawrence, KS 66045. E-mail: rshepard@ku.edu