



THE CORINTHIAN  
*The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College*

The Corinthian

---

Volume 5

Article 12

---

2003

## Pruning Mr. Wilson's Hedges: The Link between Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush

Joseph P. Richards

*Georgia College & State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian>

 Part of the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Richards, Joseph P. (2003) "Pruning Mr. Wilson's Hedges: The Link between Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 5 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol5/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at Knowledge Box. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Corinthian by an authorized editor of Knowledge Box.

**Pruning Mr. Wilson's Hedges:  
The Link between Woodrow  
Wilson and George W. Bush**

Joseph P. Richards

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to show that a connection exists between President George W. Bush's rhetoric sending America into war with Iraq and the rhetoric used by President Woodrow Wilson which led to America's entrance into World War I. The paper is broken into two major sections: the first is an analysis of Woodrow Wilson's 1917 address to Congress seeking a declaration of war against Germany. This analysis takes into consideration Wilson's background, the background of the war, rhetorical audiences, and Wilson's argument. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to beginning the establishment of a link between Wilson's rhetoric during World War I and President Bush's rhetoric which drew America into war with Iraq. I seek only to propose that such a link exists and provide a brief overview of this link. This paper is inconclusive at this time due to publication deadlines and the surfacing of new information. For that reason I only wish to propose that a link between Wilson and Mr. Bush exists and should be studied.

Arguably one of the most pivotal speeches in the history of the world is Woodrow Wilson's 1917 address to Congress seeking a formal declaration of war against Germany and the Central Powers. This speech would not only lead America into the war, but would also dramatically turn the tide in favor of the Allies. What exactly did Wilson say? Why was it so effective? Why should we care nearly 85 years later? Wilson's rhetoric is worthy of critical study because it deals with a unique circumstance: how can the President of the United States of America not only persuade the U.S. Congress to draw the country into the first world war, but also rally national support and silence any critics? Apparently Wilson accomplished these tasks. In this paper I will find out what made Wilson's rhetoric work. I will begin with the necessary background information and then dive into the juicy elements of the speech itself. How is it rhetoric? Why is it worth studying? What makes it fascinating? What are the elements of the rhetorical situation?

Finally, I will propose a correlation between Wilson and current president George W. Bush's rhetorical approaches to war with Iraq.

## **Background**

August of 1914 saw the beginning of World War I as Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey battled France, Belgium, Russia and Britain. By 1915, even American lives had been lost as a German submarine sank the British ocean liner, the Lusitania, killing nearly 1200 people including 128 Americans. However, Woodrow Wilson was re-elected to the office of the President in 1916 on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." Wilson, as well as most of America, wished simply to keep the involvement of the U.S. to impartial mediation. In Wilson's 1914 address to Congress declaring neutrality he states, "The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action, must put a curb upon our sentiments..." His appeals to isolationism and neutrality would soon be threatened, however. On March 18, 1917 Germany, anxious to overcome the military stalemate that was present in Europe, sank several American ships using the infamous U-boats. Wilson could sit by no longer. He would go before Congress on April 2, 1917 to ask for a formal declaration of war. Where did this man who would lead the country into World War I come from and how did he get where he was?

Woodrow Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia and was well-educated. He not only attended Princeton and John Hopkins University, but was also the president of Princeton in 1902. He was a man of action who constantly sought reforms. This sometimes led to conflicts with his peers and superiors. Wilson was a liberal Democrat who won the Presidential nomination in 1912 and was subsequently elected to the Presidency. While in office his reforms included fulfilling the efforts of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and hundreds of other women with the passage of an amendment for women's suffrage. He also helped create the Federal Trade Commission to police unfair trade practices (Link, pars. 1-17). John A. Thompson describes Wilson as an intellectual, an idealist and a reformer. Robert T. Oliver states that, "[Wilson] has been almost universally described as solitary, aloof, cold, dictatorial" (79). Now that we have a bit of background

about the events that led up to Wilson's speech and we know a bit more about his ideology, let us look at the actual text of his address and the most significant choices he makes.

## Methodology

The critical and foundational rhetorical element of Wilson's address is the structure of his argument. Wilson needed to persuade Congress to act with haste and join the war against Germany. Because of the importance of Wilson's argument construction, it is useful to use a Toulmin analysis of his argument. In 1958, Stephen Toulmin developed a way of analyzing argument by looking at its bare bones. Toulmin breaks an argument into three categories: major claims, major data and warrants. Toulmin defines the claim as the "conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish" and data as "the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim" (97). In *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, Roderick Hart interprets major claims as "the broadest, most encompassing, statements made by the speaker...represent[ing] what the speaker hopes will become the 'residual message' in listeners' minds". Major data then "are the supporting structures of discourse, statements answering the listener's questions: What makes you say that? What do you have to go on?" (98). Warrants are the most important step and, as Toulmin says, "general, hypothetical statements which act as bridges and authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us" (98). Warrants answer the question of how one arrives at a certain conclusion, or claim. To better illustrate how a major claim, major data and a warrant work together we shall create a hypothetical situation. In this situation a politician is stating (on national television, interrupting the finale of American Idol), "Everyone should vote for me (major claim) because I have cut taxes as your congressman" (major data). The fact that this politician has cut taxes is data to support the claim that he should receive everyone's vote. This data supports the politician's assertion, or claim. The missing warrant is that cutting taxes is desirable. Now that I have given a brief overview of the Toulmin approach, I will look at Wilson's address using this method and also seek to understand why he structured his speech in this way.

**Structural and Argument Analysis:  
Claims, Data and Warrants**

When looking at Wilson’s address nearly every statement made is a major claim. Rarely does Wilson give supporting data, but even more rarely does he provide any warrants. This is seen in an outline of Wilson’s speech via Toulmin’s logic:

Major claims	Warrants	Major Data
1. Serious policy choices must be made.	Moderation is desirable.	Must be made with moderation
2. The challenge is to all mankind.		
3. Our motives are pure.	Pure motives justify war. Human rights and democracy are worth fighting for.	No selfish No indemnities. Human rights. Democracy.
4. We must put excited feeling away.		
5. Armed neutrality is ineffectual.	We must be fully prepared for war.	Leaves us without rights of belligerents.
6. We will not choose submission.		
7. This is a grave responsibility.		
8. This is my constitutional duty.		
9. Congress should declare war on Germany.		
10. Hostile governments cannot be our friends.	Hostile governments attack our nation.	They are lying in wait. No security for democracies.
11. We see the facts.	These are highly valued.	World peace. Liberation of men. Nation’s rights.Privilege <sup>c</sup> to choose life.

One must stretch the limits of imagination to find Wilson providing any clear data for his claims. Over half of Wilson's claims have no supporting data, and the data he provides can easily be construed as claims in themselves (i.e. "We have no selfish ends," "we seek no indemnities," etc.). One of Wilson's major claims is that "Choices need to be made." This claim goes hand-in-hand with what can be called Wilson's major premise: that Congress should declare war on Germany. One small piece of data for his first claim is that democracy must be protected, which is a claim in itself. The warrant for this connection could be that democracy is the sort of thing that needs to be protected and is worth going to war for. If anyone in Congress were to deny this warrant then they would quickly be labeled a traitor. The question remains, why does Wilson list so many claims yet use so few real examples of data? The answer lies in the rhetorical audiences, which I will discuss next.

Oliver's depiction of Wilson leaves one to wonder how Wilson, a man with such an insular, introverted, uncompromising nature could manage to empathize with and persuade an entire nation (79). Tumulty even mentions that the general consensus was "[Wilson] has been uniformly headstrong, impatient of advice, his mind hermetically closed to counsel from others" (473). Oliver's article, "Wilson's Rapport with His Audience" describes how Wilson overcame his own personality in several ways: "his determination to master the difficulty," "his study of public speaking," "his practice of speaking extemporaneously," "his earnest sincerity," "his mastery of emotional speaking," and "his use of 'audience contact' devices" (i.e. Wilson knew how to work a crowd) (82-89). In April of 1917 Wilson had two rhetorical audiences to contend with. The first direct and immediate audience was the United States Congress. The second indirect audience was the American public. However, as we shall soon see, neither audience provided a tremendous ideological or even substantial obstacle to Wilson. Wilson was speaking directly to a Congress controlled by his fellow Democrats and indirectly to a public willing and ready to support their country in a war. This is evident by looking at the headlines from articles in various editions of *The New York Times* in 1916 and 1917. Such headlines include, "Congress Lining Up With Wilson; Patriotic Spirit On Eve Of War Voiced At Great Mass

Meetings,” “Pacifist Congressmen Now Realize That People Want Decisive Action,” and “One Duty for All Americans.” One line of text taken from *The Albany Knickerbocker Press* stated that Wilson “has voiced the unanimous will of the American people” (“Voices”). This article appeared the day after he gave his speech but still serves the purpose of showing the general acceptance of war with Germany. In his book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, Robert Cialdini describes a phenomenon which he deems a “fixed-action pattern” (3). A fixed-action pattern simply means that when a certain action is performed it will always produce a certain reaction. For example, whenever a baby begins crying in the middle of the night, the parent(s) will automatically respond by going to the baby’s crib. All Wilson had to do was articulate the words “human rights,” “democracy,” “liberation,” “world peace,” and “constitutional duty” and Congress was sure to respond with approval. We can see from the history books that Wilson correctly knew his audience. The reason he gave a small amount of major data is that he had no need for it. He needed only to make major and minor claims. William Covino calls this a “categorical syllogism” in his book, *The Elements of Persuasion* (2). One of Wilson’s syllogisms goes as follows:

Preserving democracy is important.  
A war with Germany will preserve democracy.  
War with Germany is important.

Wilson knew that his fellow Democrats, and even the pacifists, could not stand contrary to the supreme idea of preserving democracy. They must give in. They must be for democracy and human rights. However, Wilson still had to say what he said in a certain way. This strategic organization is what we will examine next.

### **Structural and Argument Analysis: Motivational Sequence**

A second important aspect of Wilson’s discourse is its structure. He used a common technique employed by advertisers, motivational speakers, pastors and countless others: The motivational sequence structure. Developed by Alan Monroe, this structure attempts to encourage or push an audience to perform a certain action (310-330). In this case, the actions are voting for and supporting a war with Germany. The motivational speech first gets

attention, then establishes need. Next it provides satisfaction, visualization and finally a call to action. Wilson sets up his speech this way because it made the most sense for his purpose. To see how Wilson satisfied every part of the motivational speech, I have outlined specific parts of the discourse and which element of the motivational sequence each one exemplifies:

**Attention:** Wilson's purpose was to motivate Congress to make a formal declaration of war on Germany. Therefore, he would first need to get Congress' attention. He does this most effectively when he describes the loss of American lives. This is sure to hit home with the members of Congress and strike a personal chord with each one of them. Upon hearing of American casualties, American ears generally perk up, so to speak, to what is said next.

**Need:** Wilson establishes need. He states that "we are only a single champion...of human right." Human right must be protected. He also says that "Armed neutrality is ineffectual enough at best...and is likely only to produce what it was meant to prevent." We need to be at war because we need "the rights [and] effectiveness of belligerents."

**Satisfaction:** Now it is time for the linchpin of the motivational sequence, the satisfaction. Wilson implies that declaring war on Germany will protect human rights and democracy. It will accomplish the ultimate goal of peace.

**Visualization:** The visualization aspect is important because it shows how the proposed solution will directly benefit the audience. Wilson once again calls upon defending human rights, democracy and making the world a safe place as the visualization. He implies that the world will be a much better, safer place to live after a successful war with Germany.

**Call to action:** Finally, Wilson issues the call to action: "we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice...for the rights and liberties of small nations,



for a universal denomination of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself free at last.”

### **Immediate Response and Impact**

Now that we have analyzed Wilson, his audiences and his actual speech, let us look at its immediate impact and reception by Congress and the American people. We can get a thorough account of the nation’s reactions by looking at stories from papers throughout the country on the day after Wilson’s address. *The New York Tribune* states, “Wilson’s message to Congress...seems one of the great documents of history...Never in all the long period in which [Wilson] has directed American policy has he seemed to come nearer to the ideal of the American people, the ideal of a President who should lead” (“No Praise”). *The Baltimore Sun* praises Wilson for showing “so clearly that this is a war between autocracy and democracy, that democracy and civilization itself must be set back...if Germany should emerge from it victorious” (“War”). The papers from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Chicago, Illinois, to San Francisco, California and even Providence, Rhode Island echoed similar praise for Wilson’s speech. The headline most befitting the common sentiment was found in *The American* and read, “One Duty for All Americans.” Congress voted to go to war against the Central Powers on April 6, 1917, only four days after Wilson’s address (Keylor, “World War I” 1).

### **Significance**

Having inspected Wilson’s rhetorical moves, we must judge him and his contributions. Hart lists several standards with which we can judge persuasion (34-36). For Wilson’s speech the utilitarian standard can be applied. This says that Wilson’s speech did what it was intended to do: to rally Congressional support for a declaration of war on Germany. His speech was received with thunderous applause as Congress acted uncharacteristically swiftly and unanimously to go to war. Newspapers across the country lauded Wilson and his vision as well as his ability to empathize with the will of the masses. Wilson seemed to know the impact of his own words. He said, “My message today was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud that” (qtd. in Torricelli 39).

What is not strange is that a man who put his ideals into practice, who painstakingly overcame his own aversion to compromise and public speaking; a man from Virginia who was out to change himself and America ended up changing the history of the world.

After the analysis of Wilson, his audiences and speech, a new set of questions arises: Why have I done this analysis? What importance does Wilson's speech have on modern Americans? What effect does it have on the modern world? Obviously Wilson wrote a chapter of history when he persuaded Congress to enter into World War I. This also paved the way for perhaps one of Wilson's most significant, if not greatest, contributions: the creation of a League of Nations. Although the United States failed to join, the League was the realization of Wilson's dream of a world united and balanced. The League would eventually become what is now the United Nations. Even more relevant to the 21st century are the parallels between Woodrow Wilson and President George W. Bush. Mr. Bush and Wilson share many striking similarities. The remainder of this paper will create and begin to develop a link between Woodrow Wilson's war on anti-democracy (Germany) and Bush's war on terrorism (Iraq). For this section I will give a brief background of events leading up to a press briefing given by President Bush on February 6, 2003. I will then begin an analysis of the rhetorical audiences and conclude by using Toulmin to critique Mr. Bush's arguments.

## **Background**

On September 11, 2001, terrorists struck American soil and American citizens. Since that date, revenge has resonated in the rhetoric of the country and President George W. Bush has been caught in the middle of a political, emotional, and even ideological whirlwind. Because he is the president, he is expected to lead the nation in a time of crisis. President Bush decided to lead the nation into what has been deemed, "the war on terror." One of the targets of this war was Iraq and its ruler, Saddam Hussein. On March 19, 2003, America and its allies went to war with Iraq. In order to evaluate Mr. Bush's rhetoric, I will examine his goals, rhetorical audiences, and conclude by using Toulmin's logic to critique President Bush's press briefing on February 6, 2003.

On February 6, 2003, President Bush spoke to a group of press reporters at the White House. This press briefing came after Secretary of State Colin Powell had gone before the United Nations Security Council to discuss Iraq's violations of Security Council resolutions. The violations presented by Mr. Powell included the illegal weapons program of Iraq, the effort by Iraq to cover up those weapons and Iraq's connections with groups of terrorists. Mr. Bush had several intended goals for his speech following the Secretary of State's presentation: (1) The President needed to summarize the key points of Mr. Powell's briefing. He sought to place emphasis on the major Iraqi violations of Security Council resolutions. (2) The highlighting of these violations is an attempt by the President to show that Iraq is a threat to American and international security, and cannot be trusted to abide by international law. (3) Once Mr. Bush has established that Iraq has violated international policies and will continue to do so, he makes the argument that Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, must be disarmed of all chemical, nuclear, biological and radiological weapons (heretofore referred to as weapons of mass destruction). These three goals provide the foundation for the President's larger goal: passage of a new U.N. Security Council resolution which would allow for any necessary steps to be taken to "defend ourselves, [America and its allies], and disarm the Iraqi regime" (Bush, par. 13). Mr. Bush, like Wilson, was seeking to carry the nation into a new, definitive course of action. However, President Bush also sought the aid of other nations. With that in mind, we will now discuss who the President's audiences were for this speech.

## **Audiences**

The press briefing given by President Bush had one direct and three indirect audiences. The direct audience is the group of reporters in front of whom the President made his remarks. The three indirect audiences (the American public, the U.N. Security Council, and what Mr. Bush calls, "the community of free nations" (Bush, par. 15)) are indirect because the information they receive about the speech will be disseminated by the direct audience. The reporters present for the speech will present the text and even interpretations of the briefing to the three indirect audiences. Due to time constraints placed upon the research, an analysis of the

audience with respect to their feelings and opinions before and after this particular speech by the President is incomplete. With that in mind, we will now move forward to see what Mr. Bush actually said to these audiences.

### **Structural and Argument Analysis: Claims, Data and Warrants**

Now that we have seen who the President was addressing, we must look at the actual text of his argument. To do this I will use Toulmin's approach to analyzing argument. I will outline his major claims, data and warrants, followed by the similarities between President Bush's arguments (i.e. themes) and Wilson's:

<b>Major Claim</b>	<b>Warrant</b>	<b>Major Data</b>
1. Violations of resolutions are evident.	These offenses require punishment.	Pursuing campaign to conceal. Intimidate experts and scientists. Never accounted for weapons.
2. Deception is from highest levels.	The leaders are corrupt.	Orders to conceal. Concealment activity. Movement of equipment.
3. Iraq acquired and tested using weapons of mass destruction.	They will use these weapons.	Footage of Iraqi aircraft. Developed spray devices.
4. Hussein has not done what was required	He cannot be trusted.	Did not disarm. Did not fully declare weapons program.
5. Security Council must act.	Failure to act would weaken authority and	Spoke with clarity. Will show whether words have meaning. credibility.
6. Security Council must not back down.	Dictators will continue to push the envelope if not reigned in.	Demands are defied and mocked by a dictator.

7. The world can rise to this moment.	These are desirable likely outcomes of action.	Show strength. Confident. Determined to keep peace. U.N. can renew purpose. Security Council can be able and prepared. The people of Iraq will have a chance to live in freedom.
---------------------------------------	--	--

One evident parallel between Wilson and President Bush is the idea that hostile governments and dictators will eventually attack if no preemptive action is taken against them. Another common theme between both political leaders is that this is a universal challenge. Wilson appeals to mankind and President Bush calls to those nations that are free. Both seek to put the issue of war into a global perspective. This is especially important for Mr. Bush as he is already looked upon as a maverick in various countries around the world. He must make sure that he shows his audience how the topic of going to war with Iraq directly affects their lives.

### **Comparisons and Conclusion**

The similarities between Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush strike me as being of major importance, especially considering the direct impact of people in my generation who are serving in a war with Iraq. When this research began, the war on Iraq had not begun. Therefore, the parallels I have laid out should be further investigated as the information and events become more conclusive. I believe that future generations will look back on both Wilson during World War I and President Bush during the war on Iraq and discover a great significance that those of us in this particular moment cannot see. Perhaps this evaluation can even expand our knowledge about the importance of the intertextuality of messages and how rhetoric functions throughout the ages. As the adage goes, "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it."

## **Bibliography**

Bush, George W. "World Can Rise to This Moment."  
Washington, D.C. 6 Feb. 2003.

Cialdini, Robert. Influence: Science and Practice. 4th ed. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 2001.

Covino, William. The Elements of Persuasion. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Hart, Roderick. Modern Rhetorical Criticism. 2nd ed. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

Keylor, William R. "World War I." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia. 2002.

Link, Arthur. "The American Presidency." Encyclopedia Americana. 2000. pars. 1-17 Grolier Incorporated. 2 Nov. 2002 <[www.gi.grolier.com/presidents/ea/bios/28pwils.html](http://www.gi.grolier.com/presidents/ea/bios/28pwils.html)>.

Monroe, Alan. Principles and Types of Speech. New York: Scott, Foresman, 1935.

"'No Praise Too High' For Wilson." New York Tribune 3 Apr. 1917.

Oliver, Robert T. "Wilson's Rapport with His Audience." The Quarterly Journal of Speech 27 (1941): 79-90.

Thompson, John A. Woodrow Wilson: Profiles in Power. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2002.

Torricelli, Robert, and Andrew Carroll, eds. In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century. Kodansha International, 1999.

Toulmin, Stephen. The Uses of Argument. 2nd ed. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1964.

Tumulty, Joseph. Woodrow Wilson as I Knew Him. New York: The Country Life Press, 1921.

“Voices Will of American People.” The Albany Knickerbocker Press 3 Apr. 1917.

“War Against Autocracy.” The Baltimore Sun 3 Apr. 1917.