

PERFORMING VICTORY: THE DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR OF BUSH 43

RONALDO MORELOS
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY



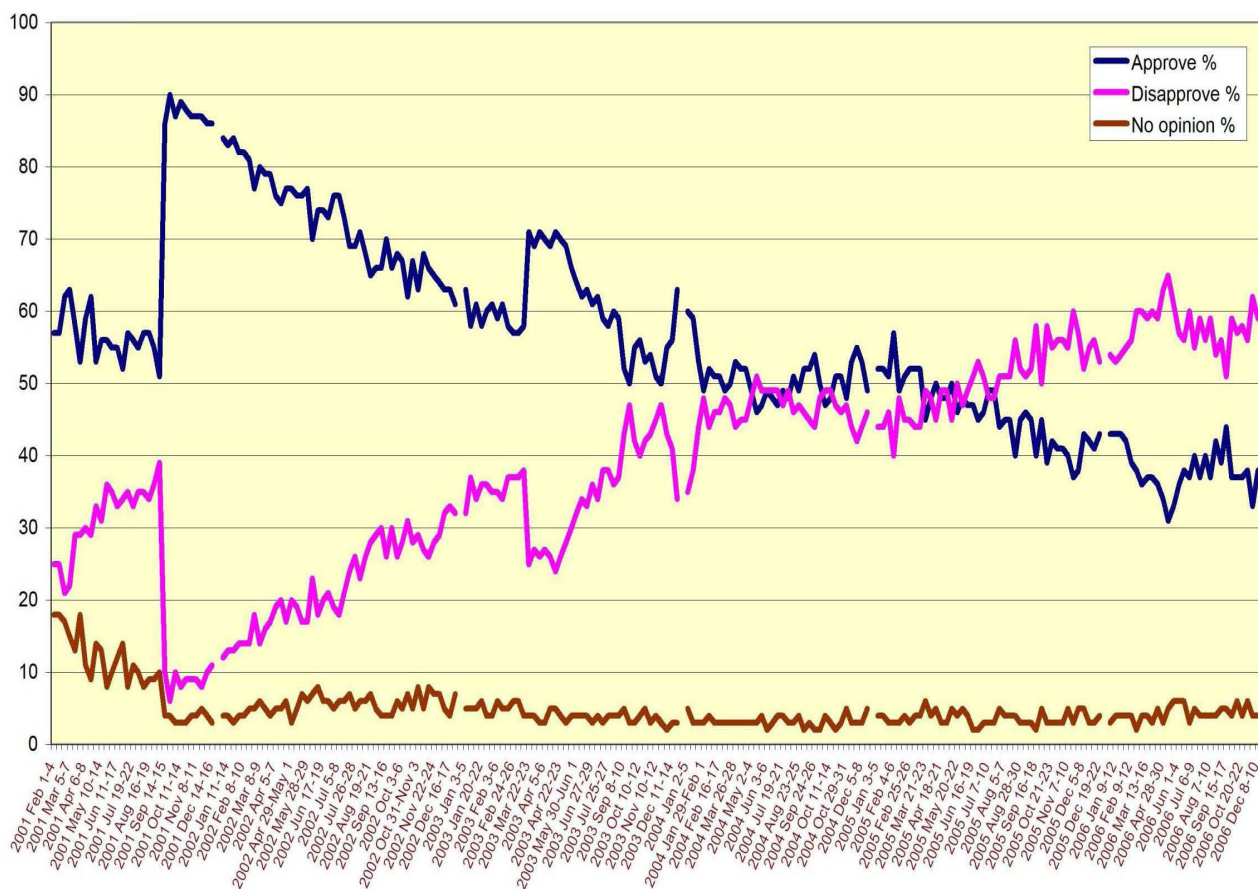
**George W. Bush, address to the nation on
19 March 2003 (White House, Paul Morse)**

IN THE PIECES TO CAMERA that George W. Bush has delivered since the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 (9/11), the ideals of “victory” and “freedom”, and more recently “success”, have driven the arguments for initiating, prolonging and sustaining belligerent action—*jus ad bellum*—against a number of different targets. Although it is quite acceptable to conclude in 2007 that the premise for the War in Iraq in 2003—based on the subsequently discredited argument that Saddam Hussein’s regime was in possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (W.M.D.) capable of delivery to London within an hour, and the supposed Iraqi links with terrorist organisation Al Qaeda—was deeply flawed, it is nevertheless important to further consider the processes by which that state of war was invoked as an integral element of the broader Global War on Terror (G.W.O.T.).

In the context of, as Victor Turner (1974) called it, the ‘social drama’ that was unfolding, this paper will consider the strategy of invoking a “different type of war” by looking at some of the performative gestures, employed by George W. Bush in the role of U.S. President, that have made up this assertion. The arguments by which the “different kind of war” is conceptualised and justified have their basis upon the acts that are considered to have provoked the need for war, namely the acts of September

11, 2001. This paper examines ways in which the performance of “presidency”—particularly as the “war president”—has generated and maintained the performative conditions of armed conflict, as well as ways in which those performative conditions have been interrupted and eroded over time.

One useful measure by which to gauge the effectiveness of the Bush presidency is the “Presidential Approval Rating”. In this study the figures are derived from Gallup Poll surveys, which have periodically been compared with similar surveys conducted by major media organisations and public opinion research centres in the United States. These figures are calculated from telephone survey responses to the question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?” Each survey is derived from a random sample of at least 1000 U.S. adult residents. The table below is comprised of Gallup Poll results from February 2001 to December 2006



The three peaks—or ‘rally effects’—in the left half of the table’s “approval” line coincide with the 9/11 event, the start of the War in Iraq in March 2003, and the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003.

Bush’s job approval rating was around 51% on the 10th of September 2001 (between then and the previous February it had fluctuated between 51% and 62%), by the 13th of September it was somewhere between 86% and 91% according to various surveys (A.B.C., C.N.N. and Gallup, 13 Sept. 2001), where it would hover until the end of the year (PollingReport.com 2001). This leap in approval ratings is also referred to as the “rally-around-the-flag effect” (Mueller 1970, Baker and Oneal 2001). The Gallup Organization began measuring presidency approval ratings when Franklin D. Roosevelt was at the White House (1933-1945), and the levels of approval that Bush rated—the ‘rally effect’—at this time were the highest that they had ever recorded (Newport et al 1997, Moore 2002).



The Happy Performative

In the Fall 2003 issue of *The Drama Review*, Diana Taylor commented on the employment by Bush (in announcing the commencement of full-scale military actions against the Iraqi regime) of “language that acts”, citing its usage in this instance as an example of a “happy” performative: that is, as being effective. It is also important to consider that the performativity of George W. Bush is, by no means, the sole driver of this “different” G.W.O.T., and to acknowledge the complex sets of agency and interest that converge upon this “opportunity”. In this sense, the “war president” is but one of the many instruments by which the G.W.O.T. is legitimised and organised, albeit perhaps the most visible of these instruments. This ensemble of instruments is sometimes characterised as the “neo-conservative” elements within the U.S. leadership, and as the “coalition of the willing” within an international context.

However, these characterisations do not present the entire picture, as many more instruments within this ensemble possess powerful determinations to remain, as with some commercial agents and interests, largely invisible (see Kirk 2003). In this case, the most “happy performatives” are not always the most visible ones. Nevertheless, the performance of George W. Bush provides some insight into the nature of this ensemble, the motivating factors involved, and the methodology that shapes this first major armed conflict of the 21st century.

“A Different Kind of War”

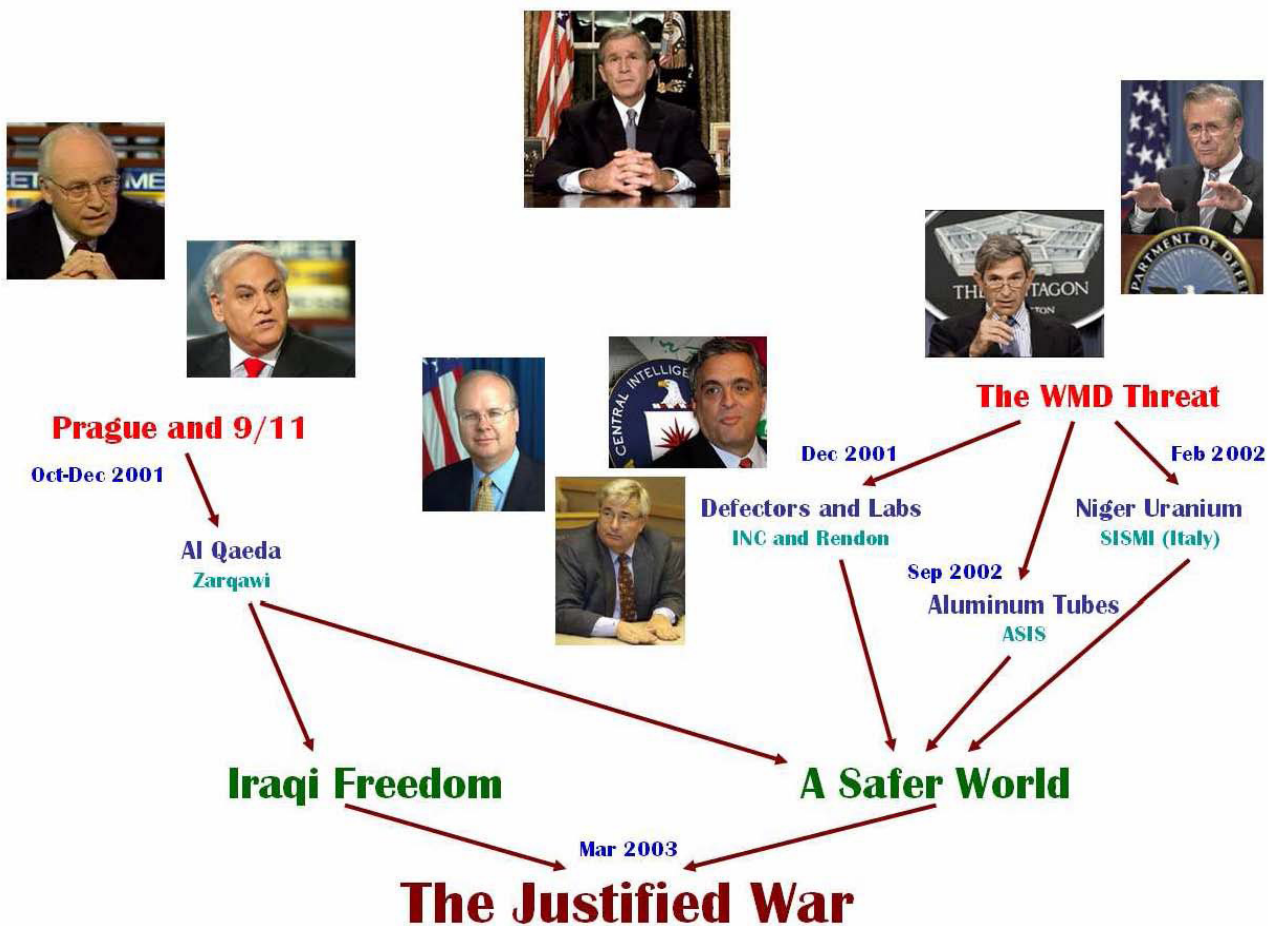
Just over 24 hours after the collapse of the two World Trade Center towers in New York in 2001, Bush began to use the idea of the “different” type of conflict that was to come:

[t]he American people need to know that we’re facing a different enemy than we have ever faced. This enemy hides in shadows, and has no regard for human life. This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, then runs for cover. But it won’t be able to run for cover forever. This is an enemy that tries to hide. But it won’t be able to hide forever. This is an enemy that thinks its harbours are safe. But they won’t be safe forever (Bush 2001a).

Over the next 18 days, on at least nine public appearances, Bush repeated that message, characterising the conflict and the enemy as one that could not have been anticipated by past conventions:

. . . this will be a different type of war than we’re used to . . . this is a different type of enemy than we’re used to. It’s an enemy that likes to hide and burrow in, and their network is extensive. **There are no rules.** It’s barbaric behavior . . . And we’re adjusting our thinking to the new type of enemy (Bush 2001b; emphasis added).

This expressed requirement for a new set of rules became a central component of the G.W.O.T. and, along with the notion arising after the 9/11 event that the world had been changed, enabled the Bush Administration to claim that the status quo with regard to the conduct of armed conflict was no longer relevant and that new standards of conduct were needed. An integral component of this



Between October 2001 and February 2003, the case for the War in Iraq was developed by the Bush Administration. This justification comprised of two central themes and four narrative threads that brought together the efforts of a number of intelligence agencies of the “coalition of the willing”. Some of the key actors in this endeavour included Richard Cheney, Richard Perle, Karl Rove, John Rendon, George Tenet, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld.

claim was the assertion that a new sense of normativity would now need to be negotiated. On the 25th of October 2001, Richard Cheney addressed the Republican Governors Association in Washington and first spoke about “the new normalcy” emerging out of “an understanding of the world as it is” (Cheney 2001).

There are two qualities in particular that came to characterise this “different” or “new” type of war. First, it was thought of as “asymmetric warfare” in that it would necessarily exploit:

. . . weaknesses using methods that differ significantly from the United States’ expected method of operations [and] . . . generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent’s initiative, freedom of action, or will [by employing] innovative, nontraditional tactics, weapons, or technologies (Joint Strategy Review 1999, cited in Metz and Johnson 2001).

Secondly, it was made possible by the application of “extrajudicial” powers in such areas as intelligence gathering programs, as well as in the detention and treatment of “illegal combatants” (e.g. the suspension of *habeas corpus*). These two qualities in combination came to be integral to the conduct of the G.W.O.T.; these qualities would also become central to the process by which the “happy performative” of Bush and his Administration would unravel. The establishment and subsequent

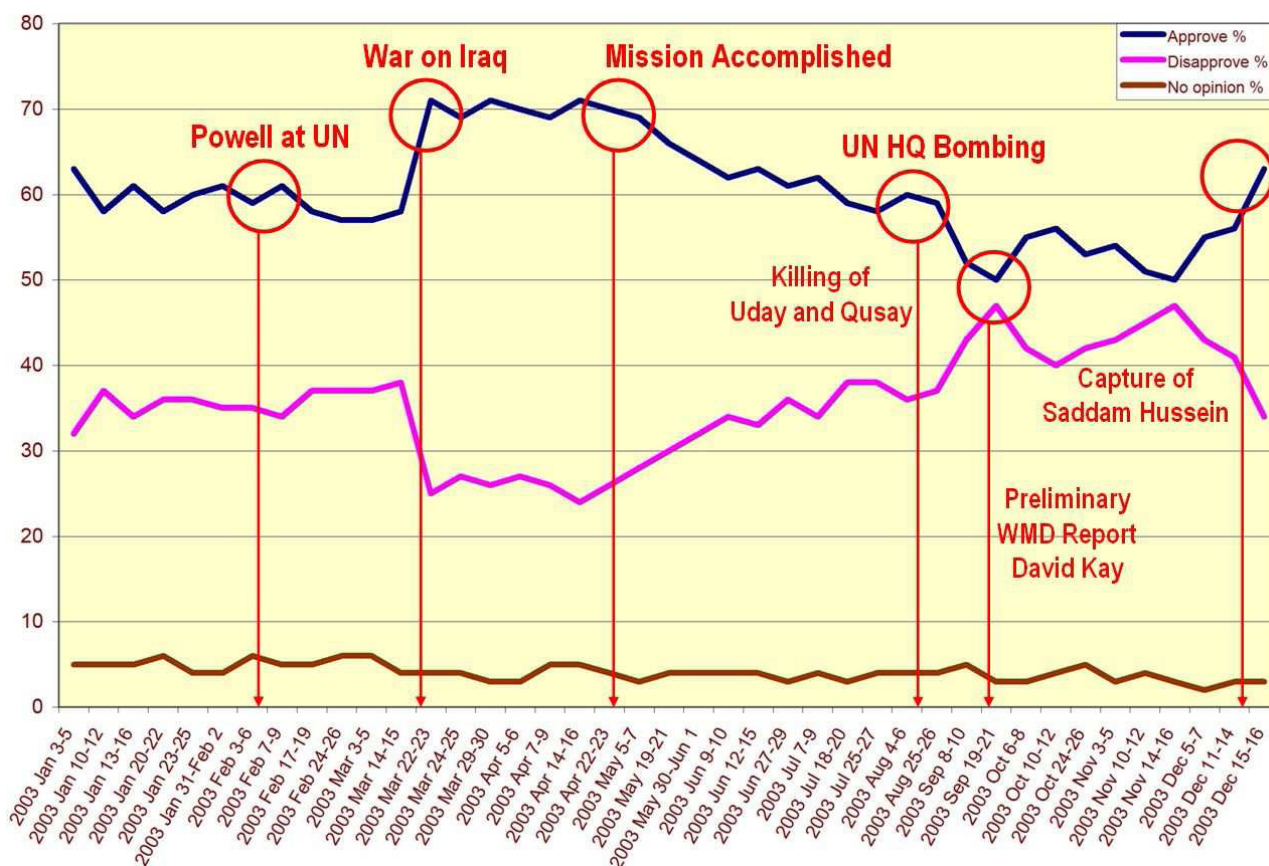
disruption of this happy performative can be seen to have rested upon the ability of Bush to present a credible case for belligerent action, and his capacity to lead the United States towards the goals that he had posited in the first days of the G.W.O.T. and the War in Iraq.

Performativity: The War President

In the context of performativity, these abilities came to be encapsulated in the role that Bush would claim towards the end of his first term of office—in his performance of the role of the “war president”.

I’m a war president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign-policy matters with war on my mind . . . I wish it wasn’t true, but it is true . . . the American people need to know they got a president who sees the world the way it is (Bush 2004).

Bush claimed this role in February 2004, just four months after the preliminary report on the existence (or otherwise) of W.M.D. in Hussein’s Iraq by US inspector David Kay, and just two months after an escalation of kidnappings and suicide bombings that indicated that Bush’s earlier claim, in May 2003, that “major combat operations” in Iraq were over, was not substantiated (Bush 2003a). A month earlier, in January 2004, the first reports of mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners in the United States’ administered facility at Abu Ghraib, outside Baghdad, came out from the International Committee of the Red Cross. These developments coincided with significant drops in the Bush presidential approval ratings in late 2003: the lowest points since early September 2001. The self-declaration of the “war president” coincides with the lowest approval rating achieved by Bush in his entire presidency until that point. From this point, aside from a slight recovery in early February 2005 coinciding with the first National Assembly elections in Iraq, Bush’s approval rating went into a steady decline. The happy performative began to lose momentum.



Nevertheless, the importance of considering the strategies that have been, and continue to be, used by Bush in performing the role of “war president” is not diminished. These strategies can be seen in the shifting vocabulary that comprises the language of this war president. Bush has not uttered the word “crusade” in public since the 16th of September 2001, the terminology applied has been more carefully chosen in the case for the War in Iraq. The notion of a “different type of war” enabled Bush to take a position that provided a high degree of flexibility to the way that the war could be conducted, however much his executive powers may have been constrained by the expediency of languages of politics and public diplomacy (see Silberstein 2002).

To begin with, the rationale for the military campaign was always kept in line with what was generally considered to be the acceptable justifications for belligerent action against another nation. The approach that Bush has taken in promoting the War in Iraq is generally in agreement with the ratings of particular justifications listed below in a Gallup Poll survey from March 2003. The frequency of Bush’s use can be seen to match the levels of public approval for each justification.

Good Reasons for Going to War Against Iraq

	GOOD	BAD
	%	%
▪ <i>Iraq prevented from using weapons of mass destruction or providing such weapons to terrorists</i>	85	14
▪ <i>The Iraqi people would be freed from the rule of Saddam Hussein</i>	84	15
▪ <i>U.S. must play a leadership role in world by standing up for what it believes is right</i>	77	23
▪ <i>It would encourage political and economic reform in the Arab world</i>	68	27
▪ <i>Oil supplies in the Middle East would be protected and stabilized</i>	63	35
▪ <i>Groups that hate the U.S. would be discouraged from attacking the U.S.</i>	57	40
▪ <i>Fuel prices in the U.S would be lower in the long run</i>	42	56

SOURCE: Gallup Poll News Service
19 March 2003

In spite of numerous authoritative reports (e.g. Duelfer 2004) that seriously questioned the validity of the W.M.D. imperative for war, Bush continues to reiterate the W.M.D. threat in qualified forms: for example, that Saddam Hussein may not have possessed any W.M.D. in 2003 but the regime had the intention of acquiring them. The conflation of the W.M.D. theme with the imperative of “victory” has been a recurring part of the strategy adopted by Bush in attempting to maintain the perception of *jus ad bellum*. Furthermore, this conflation is repeatedly magnified by the affective impact of the 9/11 event, a theme that nearly always finds a mention in Bush’s

set pieces, in proximity to any mention of the War in Iraq—although no explicit connection would necessarily be overtly argued in the passages. Woven into this, the regard of “history” is also repeatedly invoked to heighten the sense of the “stakes” involved. This is particularly the case where Bush has addressed an active military audience: two examples from 2006 illustrate the use of these themes. The first is from an address delivered on a visit to troops in Baghdad in mid-June:

[t]hese are historic times. The mission that you’re accomplishing here in Iraq will go down in the history books as an incredibly important moment in the history of freedom and peace; an incredibly important moment of doing our duty to secure our homeland. You know, right after September the 11th I knew that some would forget the dangers we face. Some would hope that the world would be what it’s not—a peaceful place in which people wouldn’t want to do harm to those of us who love freedom. I vowed that day, after September the 11th, to do everything I could to protect the American people. And I was able to make that claim because I knew there were people such as yourself who were willing to be on the front line in the war on terror (Bush, 2006a)

The second, three weeks later, in a speech commemorating Independence Day, was delivered to a military audience at Fort Bragg, North Carolina:

[v]ictory in Iraq will not, in itself, end the war on terror. We’re engaged in a global struggle against the followers of a murderous ideology that despises freedom and crushes all dissent, and has territorial ambitions and pursues totalitarian aims. This enemy attacked us in our homeland on September the 11th, 2001. They’re pursuing weapons of mass destruction that would allow them to deliver even more catastrophic destruction to our country and our friends and allies across the world. They’re dangerous. And against such enemy there is only one effective response: We will never back down, we will never give in and we will never accept anything less than complete victory . . . These are historic times . . . (Bush 2006a).

The repeated use of these themes is a critical element in the process on maintaining the perception of a “justified” war, and thus can be seen as a key element of the performativity of the “war president” (see Landau 2004). In addition, another motivational element underlying these themes was initially articulated by Bush soon after the 9/11 event:

. . . through the tears of sadness I see an opportunity. Make no mistake about it, this nation is sad. But we’re also tough and resolute. And now is an opportunity to do generations a favor, by coming together and whipping terrorism; hunting it down, finding it and holding them accountable. The nation must understand, this is now the focus of my administration. . . . now that war has been declared on us, we will lead the world to victory, to victory. (Bush 2001a)

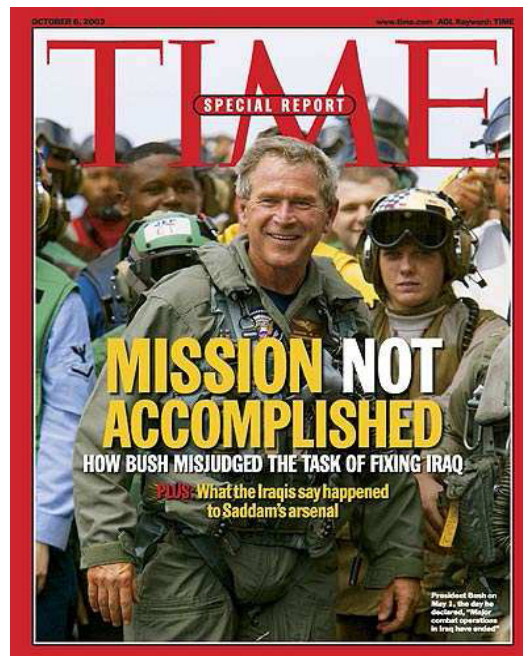
Bush uses the rhetoric of “opportunity” as a contrast to the “threat” that has been faced—the threat posited by Bush as the rallying point for the War in Iraq, for example:

America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud (Bush, 2002).

The “opportunity” serves as a rallying point for the G.W.O.T. and a call to action, to those predisposed to taking decisive action in crisis situations, and perhaps to profiting through them. Unfortunately, the rhetoric of opportunity can easily tip over into a type of bravado that has the potential

to undermine efforts in the longer term, as in Bush's response to the first signs of an Iraqi "insurgency" in the immediate period following the declaration of "mission accomplished" in May 2003:

[there] are some who feel like . . . that the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is, bring them on. We've got the force necessary to deal with the security situation (Bush 2003b).

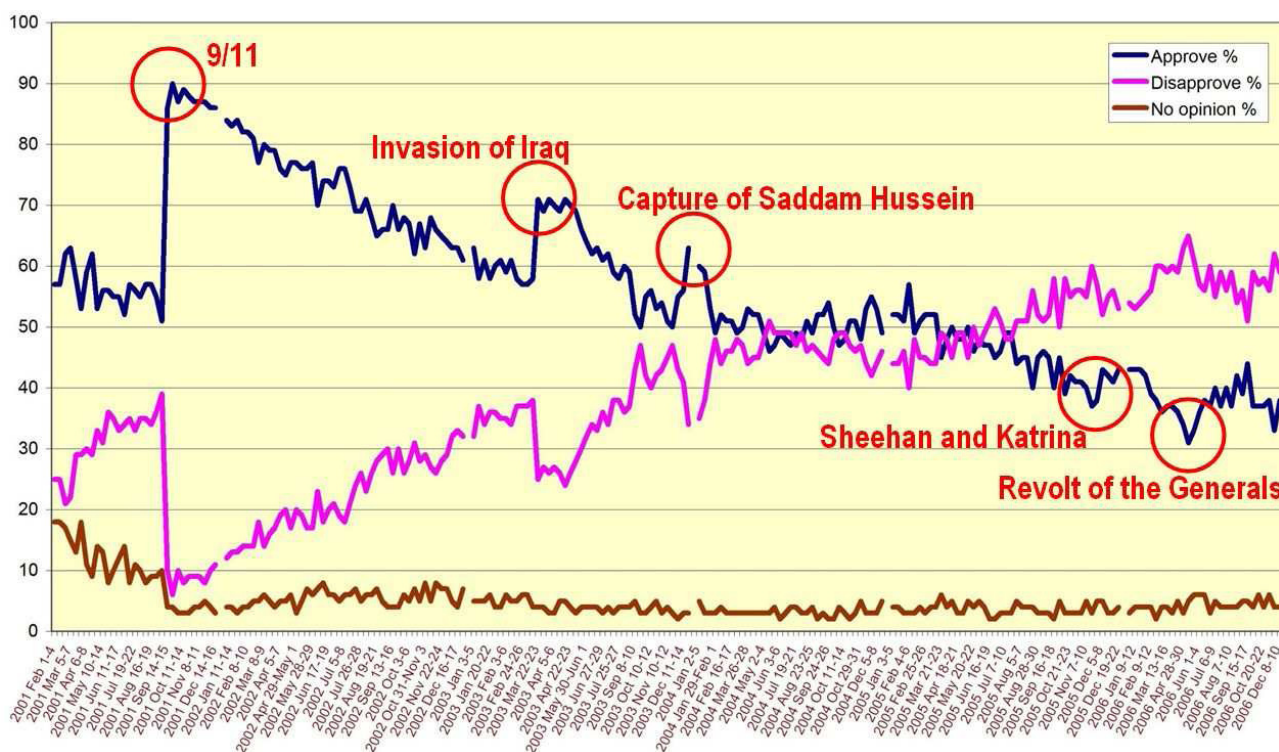


In combination, these themes and elements formed the justification for war: the happy performative of the war president, for as long as it held together. As apparent in the presidential approval ratings table, the unravelling of that justification came about from a series of events that brought into question the validity of the case for war: the deterioration of the aura of credibility of the war president. This deterioration began in earnest after the "mission accomplished" speech, when the mechanism for the construction of the case for war became visible and when the Bush Administration's reactions to those who were prepared to reveal this mechanism became apparent.

This process was accelerated when Joseph Wilson wrote an Op-Ed piece titled "What I Didn't Find in Africa", published in the *New York Times* on 6 July 2003, setting off a train of events that exposed the mechanics of the "Niger uranium" thread of the case for war. One by one, the mechanics of the other threads of the justification would also be revealed and questioned. The "Prague and 9/11" narrative, asserting that one of the leaders of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Mohammed Atta, had met an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in 2001, had never quite developed into a credible claim. Although Cheney had reiterated this assertion on numerous occasions prior to 2003, it could not stand on its own and was eventually dismissed by the 9/11 Commission Report (Kean 2005, 228-229; 522-523). The "aluminum tubes" narrative first came to public attention in early September 2002 (Miller and Gordon 2002); but by January 2003 the International Atomic Energy Agency (I.A.E.A.) had raised serious doubts on the credibility of the claims being made by the Bush Administration in relation to the tubes (ElBaradei 2003) and by October 2003 the Iraq Survey Group had dismissed the claim that the tubes contributed to a nuclear armaments program (Kay 2003). The "defectors and labs" narrative, developed for the C.I.A. and Pentagon by the Rendon Group (an international strategic communications consultancy firm contracted to produce a public relations campaign in preparation for the war) through the Iraqi National Congress (I.N.C.), first emerged in public discourse in December 2001

(Cave 2001; Miller 2001); by May 2003, the roles of the I.N.C. and the Rendon Group in developing the defector source for the “mobile laboratories” had been exposed (Kurtz 2003, Hosking 2003).

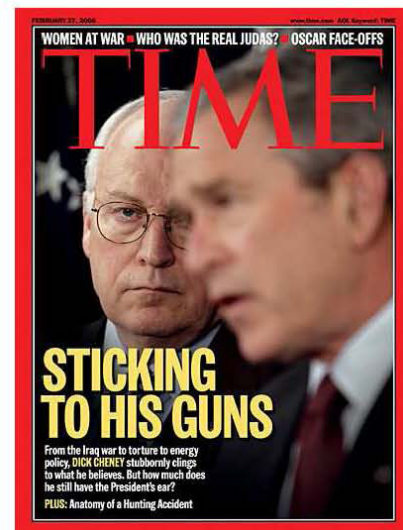
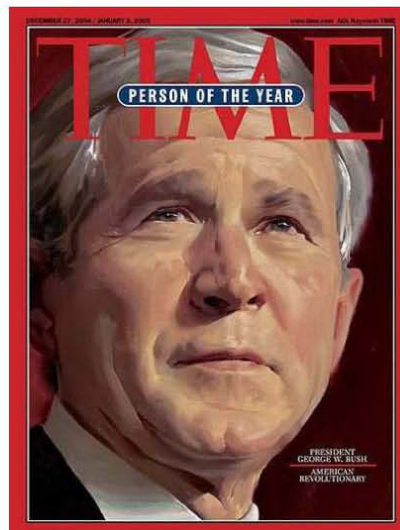
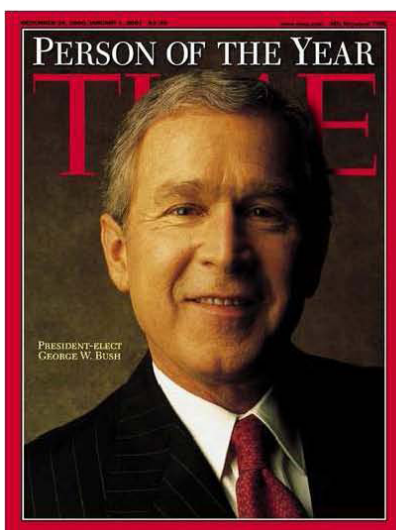
Through 2005, the unravelling of the happy performative gathered momentum through the rise of a popular movement against the War in Iraq, aided by the very public grief and profile of activists such as Cindy Sheehan, and the demise of Cheney’s advisor Scooter Libby resulting from the Wilson/Plame scandal (in which the wife of Joseph Wilson, Valerie Plame, was exposed by senior White House officials as an active C.I.A. field agent, in apparent retaliation for Wilson’s refutation of the Niger uranium story). Then with Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent chaos in New Orleans, Bush’s approval rating fell to 38%, the lowest of his presidency. Worse was still to come. In early 2006, an episode that came to be known as the “Revolt of the Generals” unfolded as six to nine retired generals of the U.S. military went on public record as highly critical of Donald Rumsfeld’s capacity as Secretary of Defence, giving voice to a crisis of confidence within the active-duty military corps and the U.S. public-at-large (Duffy 2006; Whalen 2006). By May, Bush’s approval rating fell to 31%.



Aside from the presidential approval ratings, another way of tracking the performance record of George W. Bush as President can be his appearances on the covers of major publications, in this case on the cover of *Time* magazine. Between June 1999 and December 2004, Bush appeared on the cover of *Time* on twenty occasions; twice as that magazine’s “Person of the Year”, in 2000 and 2004. In the 27 December 2004 issue, the magazine proudly declared Bush to be an “American Revolutionary”. Then something changed: he did not appear on another *Time* cover until the 27 February 2006 issue, reduced to a blur whilst the focus was now on his Vice President, Cheney, as the decisive figure of power (see below, p. 10).

In his 1999 autobiography, Bush discussed his belief in the ways that certain events or episodes can shape one’s perceptions of self, others and the environment, of what is deemed to be ‘real’:

Most lives have defining moments. Moments that forever change you. Moments that set



you on a different course. Moments of recognition so vivid and so clear that everything later seems different (Bush and Hughes 1999, 1).

Throughout Bush's political career we see his propensity for being led by the "definitions" that he would adopt and place upon his roles and situations: for his performativity to be animated by a shifting set of labels that would be repeatedly invoked to maintain his chosen performative approach with cyclic tenacity. These definitions come to function as the performative object that he presents to intended audiences—to his constituency and to the regard of history. What can also be seen throughout Bush's presidency are a number of rallying points that he posited at each stage of his time in office. In 2000 he was elected on a call to "compassionate conservatism" (Bush 2000); after 9/11 he called for a rally around the G.W.O.T.; in 2003 it was the War in Iraq, which later became the "victory" in Iraq, and then "success" by way of a "new" strategy—"the way forward"—that came to be known as "the surge". On his 22nd appearance on the cover of *Time* (6 Nov 2006) in his 71st month in the Office of the President of the United States, he would receive a new label: "The Lone Ranger". The cover caption was far more circumspect than the tone of the December 2004 cover: "He's faltering in Iraq. He's out of favor with his own party. He's increasingly isolated." The accompanying image shows Bush, literally, leaving the picture—exit stage left. Bush would have done well to note a tragic tendency of popular historical memory: powerful leaders, and certainly U.S. presidents, are ultimately remembered for the wars they waged and the scandals in which they became mired.



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Ronaldo Morelos is a lecturer in Performance and Arts Research at the School of Communication Arts in the University of Western Sydney. He holds a Ph.D. in the field of Theatre and Performance from the School of Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His dissertation is entitled *Trance Forms: A theory of Performed States of Consciousness* (2004). Previously he wrote his M.A. (Research) thesis—*Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed*—at the Queensland University of Technology, and produced a documentary entitled *Como Querem Beber Agwa: Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro* (1995).