How did the U.S. government lead its people to war?

Rhetoric and Spin

Iraq, al-Qaeda and 9/11

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Senior Bush officials would often utter "al-Qaeda", "terrorists" or "9/11" in the same sentence as "Saddam Hussein" or "Iraq" – tying them together by implication. This encouraged the idea that connections existed.

For example, in Bush's press conference about Iraq on March 6, 2003, two weeks before the war in Iraq started, he invoked 9/11 and al-Qaeda **at least a dozen times**.

At other times, the Bush administration would explicitly allege that Iraq had *collaborative relationships* with al-Qaeda, for example stating that Iraq had given al-Qaeda chemical weapons training.

The overall effect was to create the impression of a sinister web of connections. In reality, there was no evidence that Iraq was involved with 9/11; in reality, there was no evidence that Iraq or Saddam Hussein had collaborative relationships to al-Qaeda. Hussein, a secularist, apparently feared and distrusted al-Qaeda, a radical Islamist terrorist organization.

There are also strong indications that the al-Qaeda leadership felt equally distrustful of Hussein. The political scholars John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago) and Stephen M. Walt (Harvard University) have written, "Given the deep antipathy between fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden and secular rulers like Saddam Hussein, the lack of evidence linking them is not surprising."

Press conference with President Bush on March 6, 2003, two weeks before the start of the war:

> **BUSH**: I think, first of all, it's hard to envision more terror on America than September the 11th, 2001. We did nothing to provoke that terrorist attack. It came upon us because there's an enemy which hates America. They hate what we stand for. We love freedom and we're not changing. And, therefore, so long as there's a terrorist network like al-Qaeda, and others willing to fund them, finance them, equip them – we're at war.

> And so I – you know, obviously, I've thought long and hard about the use of troops. I think about it all the time. It is my responsibility to commit the troops. I believe we'll prevail – I know we'll prevail. And out of that disarmament of Saddam will come a better world, particularly for the people who live in Iraq...

> ...I think of the risks, calculated the cost of inaction versus the cost of action. And I'm firmly convinced, if we have to, we will act, in the name of peace and in the name of freedom.

Notice how President Bush doesn't *directly* claim that Iraq is responsible for 9/11; however, he begins by talking about September 11, then speaks about "an enemy which hates America" – a generalized enemy that is nameless. This reference to a generic "enemy" - or "they" – becomes the pivot point where Bush switches from talking about 9/11 and al-Qaeda to Hussein, blurring them all into one common "enemy" – requiring one common "war."

Here is a color-coded breakdown of President Bush's speech, detailing how this transition takes place:

Transcription of speech	Analysis
BUSH: I think, first of all, it's hard to envision more terror on America than September the 11th, 2001. We did nothing to provoke that terrorist attack.	← A direct and explicit reference to the attacks of September 11.
It came upon us because there's an enemy which hates America. They hate what we stand for. We love freedom and we're not changing. And, therefore,	← In context these words refer to the 9/11 attacks. But they can also be read standing alone, referring to a generic "enemy." And in context, they serve as a pivot point between the terrorists and Iraq.
so long as there's a terrorist network like al-Qaeda, and others willing to fund them, finance them, equip them – we're at war. And so I – you know, obviously,	← This is a direct merging of "al-Qaeda" and "others," ie. nation-states like Iraq, in one sentence.
I've thought long and hard about the use of troops. I think about it all the time. It is my responsibility to commit the troops. I believe we'll prevail – I know we'll prevail. And out of that disarmament of Saddam will come a better world, particularly for the people who live in Iraq. I think of the risks, calculated the cost of inaction versus the cost of action. And I'm firmly convinced, if we have to, we will act, in the name of peace and in the name of freedom.	← Now the transition is complete: Bush is talking entirely about Iraq.

BUSH: States like these [Iraq, Iran, North Korea], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.

Note the lumping together of "states" with "terrorist allies." Bush depicts a view of the world in which there is a tight-knit network or "axis" of terrorist organizations and states working in concert to "threaten the peace of the world." During the 14 months after this State of the Union Address, Bush officials worked to convince the American people that Iraq was somehow the most dangerous element of this alleged network of evil.

PRESIDENT BUSH: And we will not allow any **terrorist or tyrant** to threaten civilization with weapons of mass murder.

On the first anniversary of 9/11, Bush ascribes the same goals to the terrorists and 'tyrants' – a clear allusion to Saddam Hussein – "to threaten civilization," fusing them together as one dangerous enemy.

JIM LEHRER: Have we ever taken a preemptory strike against another country without them first attacking us?

RUMSFELD: If you think about it, we have no choice. A terrorist can attack at any time, at any place, using a range of techniques... You can only stop it by taking the battles to the terrorists where they are, and going after them.

Lehrer's question was about a preemptory strike against a *nation*, but Rumsfeld answers by discussing tactics against *terrorists*. Once again, a Bush official shifts the discussion from one issue to another, thereby blurring the distinction in the mind of the listener.

CHENEY: ...Confronting the threat posed by Iraq is not a distraction from the war on terror. It is absolutely crucial to winning the war on terror.

BUSH: **It's a man who has got connections with al-Qaeda**. Imagine a terrorist network with Iraq as an arsenal and as a training ground. So that a Saddam Hussein could use his shadowy group of people to attack his enemy and leave no fingerprint behind.

BUSH: The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder. **We will meet that threat now**, with our Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and Marines, **so that we do not have to meet it later with armies of fire fighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities**.

On March 19, 2003, when Bush announces the invasion of Iraq, he once again connects the U.S. efforts in Iraq to the 9/11 terrorist theme. Without directly linking Iraq to 9/11, he states that it is necessary to attack Iraq now in order to prevent a catastrophic terrorist attack on American soil in the future.

From a speech by President Bush on May 1, 2003, 6 weeks after the start of the war:

BUSH: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed...

The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We've removed an ally of al Qaeda...

Our mission continues. Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed.

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