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Presidential Rhetoric: How John Adams and George W. Bush Used Religion to Effectively Communicate with Their Respective Constituency

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Abstract

President George W. Bush's affiliation with the conservative and political Christian right helped him win the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. During the past six years, Bush has courted this vast voting public by referencing Christian doctrine in his speeches. John Adams, this nation's second president, was of Puritan ancestry. Yet Adams, an eloquent writer, carefully crafted his communiqués to avoid overt religiosity. An analysis of the public communications of these two presidents will show how allusions to Christianity have been used as a rhetorical and political tool to facilitate national unity for their agendas

KEYWORDS: George W. Bush, John Adams, Christian Doctrine

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ABSTRACT

President George W. Bush's affiliation with the conservative and political Christian right helped him win the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. During the past six years, Bush has courted this vast voting public by referencing Christian doctrine in his speeches. John Adams, this nation's second president, was of Puritan ancestry. Yet Adams, an eloquent writer, carefully crafted his communiqués to avoid overt religiosity. An analysis of the public communications of these two presidents will show how allusions to Christianity have been used as a rhetorical and political tool to facilitate national unity for their agendas.

How American presidents have influenced the voting public has been a controversial topic since the signing of the Constitution in 1787. The founding fathers of this nation wanted to form a new government, unlike England, the mother country, which was a monarchy. Some adherents to the English rule wanted to retain a weak-central government, as described in the Articles of Confederation. The Articles were written to help the newly emerging government rule the United States but, in effect, they were not a long-term solution. To amend this problem, the Constitution was drafted. John Adams, a delegate from Massachusetts, pushed for a strong executive government with a system of checks and balances so that no single party could become more powerful than another. Adams had ideas for a better, and hopefully, stronger government.

Adams believed all men were subject to passions and emotions that had to be disciplined and controlled. For this reason, government was essential and laws must be made and enforced to protect the rights of all individuals and to help guide each person in his growth toward mature citizenship. (Brown 24)

Adams was passionate about citizenship; he wanted each citizen to have individual freedom, but he also wanted this freedom to be something that was within reasonable limits.

He believed in service to the newly formed United States, and he proved himself by being her representative in France. His European mission was to gain funds for the flourishing new democracy. In 1796, Adams, the nation's second president, knew his greatest challenge was to keep his fragile country together. The United States was recovering from the War of



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Independence. Individual states were still delicately balanced between forming a union or fragmenting into separate, independent nations.

Between 1796 and 1800 the United States teetered on the brink of an internal revolution that, regardless of its ultimate outcome, would certainly have changed the political structure of the nation and might have dissolved the union that had been forged by the War of Independence. (Brown 14)

The ultimate consolidation of the union saw another forty-one presidents entrusted with keeping the centralized government strong. George W. Bush, the forty-third president, like Adams, saw his country embroiled in international conflict. Prior to his inauguration, the chief worry Bush had for his country was the conflict with Iraq. At first, he avoided discussing the Middle East problem during his presidential campaign, but after his election to the presidency in 2000, he was determined to advance the United States into war with Iraq. According to Peter Singer, President Bush ignored the advice of Pope John Paul II as well as United States Army General Tommy Franks that the Iraqi war would cause civilian casualties. Pope John Paul, through his envoy Cardinal Pio Laghi, stated, "A war with Iraq would be illegal, cause civilian casualties, deepen the gulf between the Christian and Muslim world, and would not make things better" (144). The president replied, "a war with Iraq *would* make things better" (Singer 144). He did not state exactly who would benefit from the war, but the implications were clear: the United States would benefit by having more control of Iraqi oil distribution.

War often destroys the country in which it is fought. As the leading country going into the Iraqi War, the United States is responsible for repairing the damage.

Many American businesses would benefit from being hired by the United States government, and many of those businesses were tangentially connected to Bush. Halliburton Energy Services, is a major oil construction company where Vice President Dick Cheney was Chief Executive Officer for five years. Cheney retired from Halliburton to enter the 2000 presidential campaign as Bush's running mate. Bechtel Group Incorporated, is an international construction and engineering company concerned with former Secretary of State George Shultz. Shultz is on Bechtel's board of directors and one of Bechtel's upper management members. "CEO Riley Bechtel was appointed in February 2003 to the President's Export Council, which advises the president on programs to improve trade" (*Windfalls of War*). Parsons Corporation, a global design and engineering firm, has several military ties to the United States government. CEO James McNulty served in the United States Army for twenty four years and was the head of the Pentagon's Strategic Defense Initiative "Star Wars." As the newly elected president, Bush had the power and influence to push for the Iraqi conflict, as well as to have a voice in which companies would help rebuild Iraq.

The United States president is arguably the most powerful person in the world. Similarly, the president has the advantage or disadvantage of being one of the most well known, and lately, the most often quoted person in the United States. The president is constantly being critiqued, criticized, and analyzed by the American public, the media, and other nations. It is because of this attention that he has a readily available audience.

It can safely be argued that a speechwriter's words, even if unaltered by the president who uses them, acquire presidential gravitas through being uttered by the president. They appear

on center stage; they go under the microscope; they become the subject of discussion and minute scrutiny, as they would not if they remained only the words of someone less in the spotlight than the president. (Metcalf 80)

It is with this advantageous publicity that the president can influence the voting public in favor of his political policies. I will analyze speeches and writings by John Adams and George W. Bush to determine whether they used two popular subjects, religion and national unity, to influence the voting public.

A major consideration as to how each man developed his respective political beliefs and strategies is the familiarization with their lives before they were elected president. Adams came from a farming family with Puritan ancestry in Braintree, Massachusetts. His parents valued education even though neither of them was formally educated. He was an intelligent, studious scholar at Harvard University. After graduation in 1755, he taught school for three years before beginning a career as a lawyer in Braintree. During this time, he was constantly writing letters, newspaper articles, and essays. His political career began with his election to the Continental Congress in 1774. Adams was thought to be "perhaps the most original and, with [James] Madison, the best read in constitutional history and law of all the Founders" (Brown 8). During the next four years he served on more than eighty committees of the Continental Congress. He chaired twenty-five of these committees. In 1778, Adams was sent as a representative of the United States to France. The United States needed to secure funds due to its severance from Great Britain. At the time, the country was recovering from the War of Independence. A year later, he returned to the United States and began writing

a constitution for Massachusetts. After he completed the constitution, he spent the next ten years traveling to Europe seeking funds and peacemaking for the newly formed colonies. He was again elected to the Continental Congress upon his return to the States.

Adams was elected vice president in 1789, and he served two terms as vice president under George Washington. At the time, there were two specific duties of the vice president: wait for the president to die and preside over the Senate. After his two terms as vice president, he was elected president in 1796 (Ellis 166). During Adams' time, political careers were developed through personal relationships and friendships.

Politics, even at the highest level in early republic, remained a face-to-face affair in which the contestants, even those who were locked in political battles to the death, were forced to negotiate the emotional affinities and shared intimacies produced by frequent personal interactions. (Ellis 17)

Bush's ascension to the Oval Office was precipitated by riding on the coattails of his father, George H. W. Bush, forty-first president of the United States. He attended Yale University and graduated in 1968 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. After graduation, he joined the Texas Air National Guard. He eventually acquired an MBA in 1975 from Harvard Business School. He unsuccessfully ran for U.S. House of Representatives in 1978. During this time, Bush was CEO of his own oil company, Arbusto, later to be renamed Bush Exploration. After oil prices began to decline in the early 1980s, Bush Exploration was bought out by Spectrum 7, another oil drilling company. Bush became the chairman of the combined companies and later arranged to inexpensively sell his company to Harken Energy Corporation

at which point he again served on the board. Bush has been criticized for his abrupt sale of Harken stock.

An SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission] investigation, conducted while Bush's father was President of the United States, declared "the investigation has been terminated as to the conduct of Mr. [George W.] Bush, and that, at this time, no enforcement action is contemplated with respect to him." But the investigation's termination "must in no way be construed as indicating that the party has been exonerated or that no action may ultimately result." As President, [George W.] Bush has refused to authorize the SEC to release its full report on the investigation. (Nationsonline.org)

He invested in the Texas Rangers in 1988 and profited handsomely after a lucrative buyout by private shareholders ten years later. He successfully ran for governor of Texas in 1994. In 1999, he declared his decision to run for president of the United States, stating that "he had been 'called' to seek a higher office," and he was elected president in November of 2000. (Singer 99)

Bush's success, many believe, was a result of his identification with, and courting of, the Christian right wing. Bush's born-again Christianity has become a major platform in his political career. Pundits wonder how Bush, in his strong religious beliefs, justifies his sense of right and wrong, good and evil. According to Singer, "For Bush, faith in God leads to faith in America" (XI). Bush connects his convictions with his country. His faith in his country is strong. Is it because his patriotism is intensely rooted in his ability to rule the country as president? It appears that Bush firmly believes his God favors the United States, as opposed to other

nations, who might not be on his (Bush) God's side. "God is not only on the side of any nation, yet we know He is on the side of justice. And it is the deepest strength of America that from the hour of our founding, we have chosen justice as our goal." (Singer XI)

Bush purports to know what the founding fathers were thinking when they drafted the Constitution. He appears to have special insight that few, if any, have.

It seems that he confuses justice with religion, and more specifically, God. He implies that God is the one who controls justice. If, as Bush believes, God is responsible for justice, then a court system in America would be pointless. Appeals would have to be made before God or a representative of God, instead of judges. Bush's indirect certainty is that he already knows God will deal with justice and punishment; the American court system is just a formality. Bush favors God's sense of justice, and by leaving the justice in God's hands, he shows his belief in God's existence, voiding all other religions and their "Supreme Being(s)."

While Bush's allusions to religious piety touch the heart of the voting public, Adams, on the other hand, did not need to announce his religious beliefs. Adams addressed freedom of religion while drafting the Massachusetts Constitution in 1779. Adams wrote,

While it [the constitution] did not guarantee freedom of religion, it affirmed the duty of all people to worship The Supreme Being, the great creator and preserver of the universe, and that no one was to be hurt, molested, or restrained in his person, liberty, or estate for worshipping God in the manner most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience, provided he did not disturb the public peace. (McCullough 222)

Growing up in a Puritan community, Adams knew the importance of religious freedom.

While Bush talks of religion and freedom, his speeches are more like inspirational testimonies than actual plans to lead his country.

We ought not to worry about faith in our society. We ought to welcome it into our programs. We ought to welcome it in the welfare system. We ought to recognize the healing power of faith in society. (Singer 111)

So if we do not believe as Bush believes, we might not benefit from government assistance as fully as those who subscribe to Bush's theology. Bush seems to be overlooking the separation of church and state. Instead, he blends both to the point that one cannot be mentioned without the other.

Adams, on the other hand, rarely used religious references. He preferred to use his intelligence and creativity. He posited his opinions on many subjects, but few contain religious overtones. According to Ellis, Adams returned regularly to his outspokenly critical attitude toward popular [religious] movement.

If not restrained by law, evangelical Christians in America would 'whip and crop. And pillory and roast' just as they did throughout European history. "The multitude and diversity of them, You will Say, is our Security against them all. God grant it," he [Adams] acknowledged. But the same emotional forces that propelled religious fanatics to commit unspeakable acts against humanity operated with equivalent ferocity in the political arena. (*Passionate Sage* 123)

It was Adams' continuous and critical writing and thinking that brought

about his ability to influence. He was a skilled author and debater and used those talents to his advantage. Although he was well known for his political prowess, Adams was disliked by many of his political partners for his ability to effectively debate any issue, and at certain times, for hours. Some of his associates, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Theodore Sedgwick at one time or another feuded with Adams. Adams did not let these feuds affect his ability to lead his country or maintain his professional and personal relationships with these men.

If revolutionary credentials were the major criteria, Adams was virtually unbeatable. His career, indeed his entire life, was made by the American Revolution; and he, in turn, had made American independence his life's project. (Ellis 164)

During the debate over the possibility of war with France, Adams' antiwar stance was unwavering. Many of his cabinet members, Thomas Jefferson included, wanted to pursue war. At the time, Adams and Jefferson, the vice president, feuded publicly. Jefferson criticized Adams' pacifism. Adams knew that his country did not have the funds, or the ability to form a successful, battle-ready military.

The president was steadily pursuing a single goal. He did not want war with France, and he did not want an alliance with Britain. He believed, however, that the people must understand the seriousness of the situation with France, that his country must be prepared in the event that war came. If, as he came to believe, France wanted enough naval strength to prevent such dominance. Equally aware of the pro-French attitude of most Jeffersonians and of the

schisms within his own party, John Adams used words and logic, the only means at his command, to encourage unity, defiance toward French control, harmony within the country, and the support of those measures of defense that he believed essential. (Brown 131)

Adams, ever the astute politician, decided to deftly maneuver his cabinet to agree to a treaty with France. He called the members to a meeting at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts. After some deliberation, they agreed to the terms for a treaty.

Adams had finally pressed through the commission to establish peace with France, but it had cost him the enmity of influential men in his cabinet and in the ranks of the Federalist party. It might cost him his reelection. This Adams realized full well. (Brown 113)

A war with France may have catapulted Adams into public favor, however, he chose to keep his country from encroaching further into debt.

John Adams considered peace with France the greatest achievement of a long and eventful life. (Brown 174)

Unlike a careful Adams, Bush does not seem to be concerned with keeping peace. He is more concerned with his ability to control his political environment. His lack of political effectiveness may fuel his desire for power. He thinks more like a businessman than a presidential leader. "One of his favorite phrases is 'I'm not willing to negotiate with myself'" (Singer IX). His apparent stubbornness is his strategy for leadership. In his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush stated Saddam Hussein attempted to

buy fissionable yellow cake uranium from Niger to build weapons of mass destruction. Later, it was discovered the information was false, but Bush did not pay much attention to falsified information. He wanted a war with Iraq. Even false or weak information was enough for him to push for war. His smug attitude toward United States hegemony discredits his leadership abilities. When asked if he thought the attacks on Iraq without the United Nations authorization were necessary, Bush stated, "I'm confident the American people understand that when it comes to our security, if we need to act, we will act, and we really don't need United Nations approval to do so[...]" (Singer 162).

Ron Goodman, Discipleship and Administration Pastor at Stutsmanville Chapel in Harbor Springs, Michigan recently stated in an interview concerning Bush's attitude:

What I am saying is that my perception of his public persona is arrogant and that he might believe he is delivering a kind of prophetic truth and righteousness to the world. Clearly, he is an advocate of power politics in the world, and to bring truth to the world by military might. The Bible warned that "those who live by the sword will die by the sword", and I fear we have multiplied our enemies a hundred fold and more during his presidency, while not making very many friends. It is one thing to fight a "holy war" protecting the world from totalitarianism as we did in WW II. This is not the same. We are fighting a much different kind of enemy—but clearly there is an enemy who is a threat to America and democracy and a safe world—there are those who would establish Islamic rule and destroy us. My point is that it

seems to me that we have done more to empower their cause, than hinder it. (Goodman)

Bush cannot and will not compromise his political agenda. The decisions he makes as president directly affect the American republic. Whether he considers the needs of his citizens or not is still debated.

John Adams was a firm believer in the responsibility of citizenship. He felt it was the duty of the elected leaders to make decisions for the citizens of the United States.

Adams believed all men were subject to passions and emotions that had to be disciplined and controlled. For this reason, government was essential and laws must be made and enforced to protect the rights of all individuals and to help guide each person in his growth toward mature citizenship. (Brown 24)

An informed electorate was duty bound to choose the ones who were able to govern the country, draft the laws, and protect citizens' rights. Adams

felt that he was the advocate and counselor for all the people; that, within the framework of the law, he must lead, communicate with, educate, guard, and protect all Americans. (Brown 24)

The decisions he made as president were to protect his people.

During Adams' presidency, the Alien and Sedition Acts were fiercely debated topics. An Act Concerning Aliens gave the

president authorization to deport aliens when they were considered dangerous to the peace and safety of the nation. (Brown 122)

No jury trial would be made available. There would be no explanation for the deportation. The Sedition Act was "designed to silence criticism of public officials and their actions" (Brown 122). Congress hurriedly passed both acts. Adams was criticized for not taking an active part in these decisions. The criticism stemmed largely from the Jeffersonian party. Ralph Adams Brown presents the facts,

The president never opposed the passage of this legislation, and he did not kill the acts with a veto as he might have tried to do. (124)

After his presidency, Adams wrote, "I knew there was need enough of both, and therefore I consented to them" (McCullough 505). It was a moment in Adams' presidency when he made a decision he may not have agreed with. Yet, he approved the Alien and Sedition Acts because they were in the best interest of his country. A possibility of war with France loomed large, and a high number of French immigrants lived in the United States. Many of Adams' colleagues feared the French would attack from within the United States. Many criticized Adams, but in the end, protecting the citizens of his country was the most important concern for the president.

To become the leader of the most successful republican experiment is a difficult task. One must consider the needs of the citizens and the government they own. Adams and Bush came into their presidencies at difficult times. Adams followed George Washington, the "Father of the Nation" and because of that, "whoever followed Washington was probably doomed to failure" (Ellis 185). Adams knew what was necessary to lead his country, but because of his predecessor, he was limited to mere greatness. He was a founding father who encouraged

and pushed for a republic nation. He wanted separation of church and state, and he was a firm believer in freedom of religion. He attempted to unite his nation, not with religious testimonies, but with dedication, brotherhood, and national pride.

Bush came into the presidency with the Iraqi War on the heels of his election. He used unsubstantiated information as well as heightened scare tactics to justify the United States' progression into war. He blatantly ignored the United Nations' decision to continue with inspections of Iraq for weapons of mass destruction.

George H.W. Bush created a successful unity of other countries when it came to the Persian Gulf War, which was a cooperation of nations for the benefit of all. Whereas these same nations fighting the Iraqi War begrudgingly sent troops to assist the United States. George W. Bush isolated the United States from

these countries when he campaigned for the Iraqi War. His use of religion in an attempt to unite his country after 9/11, as well as the possibility of another attack, helped him successfully launch his war efforts.

The religiosity of the Bush administration, as well as George W. Bush himself, appear to be more like watching an early Sunday morning televangelical program as opposed to a national address. In his attempt to unify the nation, Bush ultimately alienates non-Christian religions because of his Machiavellian statements. This country should not be based on an "us against them" policy. Instead, Bush should look back to the successes of earlier national leaders; George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and try to find a way to successfully lead his nation.

Many questions generated from this research are still left unanswered.

Some of these questions could be researched in the future and developed further. What is the history of religion in Colonial America? When did it progress from absolute freedom to selective freedom? What was the freedom of dissent during Adams' presidency? Is there suspected treason during Bush's presidency? During Bush's presidency, what is the religious opposition of politics? What are the "six degrees of separation" in Bush's cabinet and Adams's cabinet; how can the cabinet members be connected to each president; and how did they choose the members? Who takes the blame for Bush's ignorance or mistakes? What kind of lessons can be learned from these men's political successes and failures? By researching these topics, a more informed opinion can be realized concerning the myriad components of political rhetoric.

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