

# **DENIAL AND DECEPTION**



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A Study of the Bush Administration's  
Rhetorical Case for Invading Iraq

Alan Kennedy-Shaffer

*Universal Publishers  
Boca Raton, Florida  
USA • 2006*

*Denial and Deception: A Study of the Bush Administration's  
Rhetorical Case for Invading Iraq*

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Universal Publishers  
Boca Raton, Florida • USA  
2006

ISBN: 1-58112- 934-3

[www.universal-publishers.com](http://www.universal-publishers.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kennedy-Shaffer, Alan.

Denial and deception : a study of the Bush administration's  
rhetorical case for invading Iraq / Alan Kennedy-Shaffer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58112-934-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. United States--Politics and government--2001- 2. United  
States--Foreign relations--2001- 3. United States--Military policy.  
4. Bush, George W. (George Walker), 1946---Political and social  
views. 5. Rhetoric--Political aspects--United States. 6. Iraq War,  
2003---Causes. 7. United States--Foreign relations--Iraq. 8. Iraq--  
Foreign relations--United States. I. Title.

E902.K457 2006

973.93--dc22

2006018796

*For my family*

*and*

*for all those who have died in Iraq.*



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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

For the first time since September 11, 2001, a majority of Americans believe that the invasion and occupation of Iraq has made the United States less safe, according to the latest polls conducted by national media consortiums. If President George W. Bush and his Administration actually believe their own rhetoric, the notion that a war fought in the name of democracy could make our nation more vulnerable to attacks is inconceivable. From a strategic perspective, the conflict in Iraq increasingly resembles the Vietnam War every day. Despite an insurgency allegedly in its “last throes,”<sup>1</sup> as Vice President Dick Cheney forecast last May, casualties continue to mount and body bags continue to be sent home. At the same time, military recruitment efforts have consistently come up short and advertised enlistment bonuses grow larger by the hour.

Rhetorically speaking, the Bush Administration has consistently evaded questions of how long the war would take, as outlined in a rhetorical timeline in *The New York Times* last summer. Carefully avoiding timetables and statistics, Bush, Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and military spokespersons have attempted to spread optimism since the initial incursions into Iraq about what Bush has deemed a “vital mission”<sup>2</sup> by employing platitudes about freedom, democracy, and staying the course. While a variety of books have come out recently that discuss the prospects of the War on Terrorism, little has been published about the wartime rhetoric of the Bush Administration and the response of the American people. In the first academic study of Bush’s case for war, I pore through the statements

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Sanger, “How Long a War? What They’ve Said,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2005, WK 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

by Administration officials, reports by Congressional leaders, and updates by military commanders, in an attempt to get at the heart of the relationship between politics, the press, and public opinion in times of crisis and war.

There are several questions that warrant investigation: How has the rhetoric of the Bush Administration evolved since the first push toward war? Did White House officials lie in making the case for war, and if so, why? Why did the American public believe the rhetoric of the Bush Administration for so long, and what has caused the decided shift in public opinion against the war in recent months? Finally, do military ends justify questionable rhetorical means? These questions could easily be applied to any war in American history, but are especially pertinent in light of the propaganda techniques and misleading statements of White House officials making the case to invade Iraq.

In part one of this study, I review and discuss the major political science literature about presidential rhetoric, placing particular interest upon how the major rhetorical theories and frameworks have changed over time. Since the 1970's, numerous theories about the president's ability to influence public opinion and his susceptibility to factors beyond his control have been proposed. Some of these deal primarily with psychological aspects of the president as an individual, such as personality and charisma. Others deal more with historical aspects of the presidency, comparing how various presidents have handled relations with the press. I am most interested in how presidents attempt to sway and are swayed by public opinion.

One of the major goals of this study is to analyze the wartime rhetoric of President George W. Bush, focusing on the temporal progression of the Administration's case for war. In order to fairly assess the impact of the rhetoric of President Bush and his Administration on public opinion about the necessity of going to war with Iraq, I compare what the White House said publicly between September 11, 2001, and the initial invasion, during the initial invasion, and after Bush's premature victory speech. By employing random sampling in choosing which weeks to analyze within each of these three periods—pre-invasion, invasion,

occupation—my findings are as free from selection bias as possible.

Period 1: 9/11 Attacks—Initial Invasion of Iraq: 79 weeks

Period 2: Initial Invasion of Iraq—“Mission Accomplished” speech: 7 weeks

Period 3: “Mission Accomplished”—2006 State of the Union: 144 weeks

After randomly selecting seven weeks from each period upon which to concentrate, I review and analyze the major speeches, statements, and press conferences published by the White House Press Secretary during the chosen weeks. As a further precaution against selection bias, my main rhetorical source is the White House Iraq archive, an online collection of documents chosen by the Bush Administration to represent its rhetoric regarding Iraq. Using content analysis, I build a case that the Bush Administration deliberately misled Congress and the American people about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s regime and launched a military mission in response that was doomed to fail. In a press conference on March 13, 2002, for instance, Bush said that Vice President Dick Cheney was on the road advocating for the invasion of Iraq, explaining that Iraq is “a nation which has weapons of mass destruction and apparently is not afraid to use them. And so one of the—what the Vice President is doing is he’s reminding people about this danger.”<sup>3</sup> Later in the same press conference, Bush brushed aside a question about why his Administration no longer seemed to care about finding Osama bin Laden, saying, “The idea of focusing on one person is—really indicates to me people don’t understand the scope of the mission.”<sup>4</sup> In a particularly telling response to a different question, Bush presciently described the lessons of the Vietnam War: “First there must be a clear mission. Secondly, the politics ought to stay out of fighting a war.”<sup>5</sup> Individually, Bush’s explanations seem to have little to do with the decision to invade Iraq, but taken together begin to give us a sense of how the White

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<sup>3</sup> White House Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush Holds Press Conference,” Mar. 13, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020313-8.html>, (2 Feb. 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

House intended to justify a vaguely defined war in a volatile region.

In part three of this study, I compare the trends in President Bush's approval ratings and public opinion about the war in Iraq with the trends in the Dow Jones Industrial average, a leading economic indicator, and casualty rates, a proxy for Iraq war developments. From this time series, I am able to measure change over time in several variables simultaneously: Bush's popularity, military developments in Iraq, public opinion about the invasion, the Dow Industrial Average, and Bush's rhetoric. I also begin to determine the causal mechanisms that figure into public opinion regarding the Administration's case for war and the invasion of Iraq. For example, by looking simultaneously at the trend lines for Bush's rhetoric and his approval ratings, I attempt to determine whether the Administration's rhetoric influences public opinion, whether public opinion influences the Administration's rhetoric, and whether developments in Iraq play a significant role in swaying public opinion about the war and the commander-in-chief.

Confounding variables always pose a danger to causal studies but that danger can be reduced, if not eliminated altogether, by controlling for them. In this case, I control for some of the impact of military developments by comparing Bush's approval ratings over time with public approval for the invasion and occupation of Iraq over time. My specific hypothesis here is that Bush's rhetoric is fairly independent of events on the ground in Iraq, perhaps because of a lack of public attention to the dark side of war during the initial stages of the conflict.

Another intriguing aspect of the rhetoric surrounding the war in Iraq is the delayed response by Democratic elites and other Bush critics to the Administration's pro-war rhetoric. How strong is the rally effect and how long does it last? Is it possible for an Administration to permanently silence dissenting views inside or outside the White House? My hypothesis on this score is that while the President won immediate acquiescence from Congress to his proposal to invade Iraq, Bush's deceptive statements caused him to lose control of public opinion in the end.

By mapping the major rhetorical and military developments in the war in Iraq along a time series, I paint a contextual picture of Bush's Iraq rhetoric and how he

changed his tune as casualties mounted and opposition to his policies grew. I ask how the Administration's rhetoric changed over time, how effective dissenters were in halting the march toward war, and why public opinion finally turned against the war in Iraq. These are some of the tough, but testable, questions that I hope this investigation begins to answer.



# **PART I**

## **A Review of Presidential Rhetoric**



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Charismatic Presidency

Political leaders do not speak in a vacuum and the Bush Administration is no exception. While President George W. Bush and his advisors may exude confidence in their collective ability to set the terms of the debate about the Iraq War, a multitude of contextual dynamics limit their autonomy. Social, historical, political, informational, and psychological factors constrain their actions and prevent them from exercising complete control over the rhetorical arenas in which they speak. Recent events, in fact, indicate a lack of control much greater than anyone in the White House ever expected. As Iraq plunges deeper into civil war, the president's approval ratings continue to plummet and his advisors seem to be increasingly divided about how to handle the situation. Should they withdraw the troops from Iraq? Should they "stay the course" and hope that the conflict does not turn into another Vietnam? Should they work with the United Nations to try to achieve "peace with honor"? Whichever course the Administration chooses, the president will be forever haunted by accusations that he and his advisors misled the country in the initial push to invade Iraq. Historians will long debate the reasons for the collective inability of the Bush Administration to continue to sell the War in Iraq to the public but one thing is certain: We the People have a limited tolerance for rhetorical manipulation. Perhaps the president put it best on September 17, 2002, when he said, "Fool me once, shame on—shame on you. Fool me—you can't get fooled again."<sup>1</sup>

That said, it is increasingly clear that the Bush Administration believed that it could sway public opinion from the outset and has employed a variety of techniques

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<sup>1</sup> "Bushism Video: Fool Me Once – George W. Bush Quote," *About, Inc.*, 2006, <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/bushvideos/v/bushfoolme.htm>, (12 Mar. 2006).

over the past five years to maximize persuasion. This raises a few questions: How did the White House succeed in selling the War in Iraq to the public? What convinced the public to follow the Administration into a second major military venture? Why do a majority of Americans now believe that our nation has gotten off on the wrong track? Before we can discuss whether the Administration succeeded in influencing public opinion on the War in Iraq or found itself buffeted by the winds of public opinion, we must assess what rhetoric is and how it has been used in the past. Because no analysis of the Bush Administration's rhetoric promoting the War in Iraq would be complete without a review of the literature on the subject, I intend to use this chapter to explore the major theses on presidential rhetoric proposed by political scientists over the last two decades. Throughout history, presidents have always seized upon speechmaking as a way of promoting their agendas, a fact that has not been lost upon researchers in their effort to distill the essence of rhetoric from the contexts in which it has been used. From the charismatic presidency to the rhetorical presidency to going public to framing, several competing theories have been suggested that shed light upon what makes rhetoric presidential and why presidents resort to rhetoric.

Until fairly recently, presidential rhetoric—indeed, political rhetoric in general—was studied primarily in broad, qualitative terms. The most famous Greek orators are frequently depicted as demigods, charismatically luring their followers into a trance with eloquent phrasing and emotional appeals. Roman rhetoricians raised the bar slightly by writing elaborate books about rhetoric, but those contained few concrete theories while generally accepting the mystic assumptions made by the Greeks. Until the late twentieth century, rhetoric remained more of a mythical creature to be tamed than a scientific phenomenon to be measured. Then something changed. Perhaps a consequence of the increased emphasis on technical expertise in the 1970's—nowhere more evident than in the efforts by President Jimmy Carter to reorganize the bureaucracy—political scientists began to label the qualities that made speeches inspiring and rhetoric effective. By the mid-1980's, academic works began to appear that attempted to remove the veil of mysticism from the

rhetorical process. President Ronald Reagan cemented this trend by calling himself the “Great Communicator,” a phrase that seems to have stuck to the Teflon president. Separating the speech from the speaker, the qualities of rhetoric could now be considered as distinct entities. Words were dissected, speech patterns were analyzed, and symptoms of spellbound listeners were diagnosed. “Charisma,” in particular, began to be quantified, broken down into components that could be reassembled by charisma consultants and sold to aspiring speakers for a nominal fee. Many researchers believed that it would only be a matter of time before rhetoric could be sold like perfume and applied in doses.

Ann Ruth Willner, for example, set the stage for a revolution in the study of rhetoric with her provocative study of charismatic political leadership in 1984. Defining political charisma as a combination of ambition, eloquence, and inspiration in a leader presented with a pivotal moment and potential followers to put under a spell, Willner approaches charisma with a certain level of detachment not common in prior works. She identifies Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Fidel Castro, among others, as charismatic leaders, subsequently discussing the characteristics that made each one charismatic. “There seems to be relative consensus concerning the elements combining to produce political charisma and concerning their order and sequence,” Willner explains, “that is: (1) a crisis situation, (2) potential followers in distress, and (3) an aspirant leader with (4) a doctrine promising deliverance.”<sup>2</sup> Where Willner falls short is in her discussion of which criteria are essential and which are optional. Have there been no charismatic leaders in times of peace? Must leaders get lucky, so to speak, and inherit crises in order to truly inspire their followers? Willner’s case hinges upon the assumption that crisis situations act as catalysts, permitting skilled political aspirants to step up and seize the opportunity to exert leadership in a vacuum. Mussolini, for example, tried his hand as a wartime prime minister in Italy during the summer of 1923 after the murder of Italian border

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 43.

commission officials while on a mission in Greek territory. “Mussolini immediately sent a twenty-four-hour ultimatum to the Greek government containing seven demands,” Willner notes. “In Rome, street corners were reportedly filled with groups of people surrounding those with newspapers, who read out loud the text of the ultimatum as their hearers cheered each demand vociferously.”<sup>3</sup> As a result of the incident, Mussolini’s popularity skyrocketed, much as Bush’s ratings rose immediately after his own ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. Most intriguing about Willner’s study, however, is her failure to adequately account for the loss of charisma in figures previously considered to be charismatic. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, President George W. Bush’s popularity skyrocketed in accordance with the “rally-round-the-flag”<sup>4</sup> effect, as did the popularity of Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City. Unlike Giuliani, who retired from public view soon after receiving compliments for his handling of 9/11, George W. Bush wasted the opportunity to be a respected leader by invading Iraq on questionable pretenses, illustrating the elusive nature of charisma.

Approaching rhetoric from a slightly different angle, Roderick P. Hart published a book three years after Willner that focuses more on the leader’s perspective than on the follower’s perspective. Beginning with the hypothesis that “presidents use speech to convince themselves and others that they are not impotent,”<sup>5</sup> Hart delves into the psyche of presidents and emerges with the conclusion that the new style of presidential politics inevitably encourages speechmaking as a substitute for real political power. Rhetorical leadership is replacing actionable leadership as the common currency and presidents are certainly not immune to the shift. By building up an image of strength through persuasive rhetoric, presidents could become strong. Rhetorical strength translates into real strength, permitting presidents to push around the public and the press. Hart details a perpetual war between the president and the press that requires a constant push and pull on the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>4</sup> John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Roderick P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 79.

part of the president. It doesn't matter whether the president's party controls the legislative or judicial branches of government; the president has to fight to defend his image either way. As Hart explains, "Today, presidents speak no matter which party controls Congress; also, speech is no longer summoned exclusively by the electoral genie. It is now the daily affair of an individual wishing to be all things to all of the American people."<sup>6</sup> Unlike past presidents, modern presidents are giving more and more speeches in which they say less and less. They anticipate and preempt opposing arguments by following the polls and reacting to them, rather than waiting for feedback in the form of letters and phone calls from angry constituents. "Now, presidents calculate feedback before it exists," Hart posits, "using estimations of this 'feedforward' to determine who they should speak to and about what."<sup>7</sup> Spurred on by the desire to avoid bad press, presidents pursue opportunities to augment their public prestige that would not be controversial or debatable. Annual rituals and special ceremonies, for instance, present perfect opportunities for presidents to put their best foot forward without the possibility of hostile journalists stepping on their toes. "Ceremonies are an enormous political asset to a president because they obviate unseemly dialogue with detractors and because they encourage, rather than inhibit, pontificating," Hart notes.<sup>8</sup> As long as presidents maintain high public marks by speaking at as many ceremonies as they can handle and think highly of themselves, nothing else really seems to matter.

Starting around the time that Hart was pontificating about the perspective of the president, Mary E. Stuckey chose to focus on why presidents fail and how future presidents might learn from the past. In her most noteworthy book entitled, *Strategic Failures in the Modern Presidency*, she looks at presidential failures from the Great Depression to the early 1990's, categorizing and analyzing them. Concluding that most presidential failures are either public failures, unilateral failures, or private failures, Stuckey provides a framework for failure that can easily be

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 204.

applied to the presidency of George W. Bush. Caused by moral transgressions and ethical lapses by either the president or his top lieutenants, public failures generally scar not only the president involved but also the presidency in general, with prime examples being the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals. The second kind of failure occurs when a president does not play well with others, especially Congress, and those others decide to exact revenge for the disrespectful treatment accorded them by the chief executive. Numerous presidents, for instance, have acted as if they thought that the executive branch were the only branch of government, failing to recognize the constitutional checks and balances inherent in our system of government. Inter-branch failures usually lead the United States Senate to reject the president's judicial or executive nominees, such as the recent case of John R. Bolton. Originally nominated by Bush to serve as Ambassador to the United Nations in March of 2005, Bolton raised the ire of numerous senators as a result of his alleged harassment of subordinates for opposing the Administration's agenda. In the end, the president's failure to nominate a candidate willing to respect the Constitutional prerogative of the legislative branch during the confirmation process forced Bush to appoint Bolton temporarily after Congress recessed. The final, and most frustrating, kind of failure stems from overreaching. Highly ambitious presidents are most susceptible to private failures that may not be immediately visible to all but are no less damaging in the long run. Prominent examples include President Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnam War and Bush's decision to invade Iraq. In discussing why Johnson failed to maintain public support for the Vietnam War, Stuckey explains, "Although prosecuting a war in an unfamiliar place made the public more dependent on the president for information, the president was not the only source of information on the war. When the president's interpretation conflicted with the images seen nightly on the national news, the result was an undermining of presidential interpretive status."<sup>9</sup> Emphasizing the vulnerability of presidents to negative externalities, Stuckey

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<sup>9</sup> Mary E. Stuckey, *Strategic Failures in the Modern Presidency*, (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997), 156.

notes with a hint of satisfaction that “even during wartime, presidents do not have the power to act unilaterally over long periods of time without reckoning with Congress and the American public.”<sup>10</sup>

While Willner, Stuckey, and Hart were researching and writing their individualized hypotheses about the deliberately charismatic presidency, other political scientists were beginning to coalesce around a shared notion of the presidency as rhetorical by necessity. At annual conferences, these thinkers shared ideas about the presidency as an institution and how it operates within the modern American political environment, challenging each other to go beyond pseudo-science and popular psychology. In 1983, Theodore Windt and Beth Ingold published a collection of essays discussing new ways to compare the rhetoric of presidents, entitled, *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*. As a predecessor to Jeffrey K. Tulis’ landmark book, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, this compilation of articles begins to raise some of the issues that Tulis later fleshes out and that presidential scholars have debated ever since. Windt and Ingold open with a classical introduction to the study of rhetoric, describing how Plato bashed rhetoric as a tool of demagogues while Aristotle defended rhetoric as an avenue for dialogue. “The demagogue is interested only in his audience—usually with arousing its most base passions—with little concern for consistency of ideas, or their validity,” the authors remark. “The doctrinaire ideologue pursues the purity of thought and language—so convinced is he that his ideas are true and just—that he cares little or nothing about audiences.”<sup>11</sup> The evolutionary trends from classical rhetoric to modern rhetoric, Windt and Ingold continue, have been a direct result of the rise of the mass media. As the mass media has increasingly enveloped national politics, the quality of presidential rhetoric has declined precipitously. In the modern political environment, presidents have been stripped of everything but their rhetorical skills. In a joint article, entitled, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” James W. Ceaser and several other prominent scholars make a strong case

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Windt with Beth Ingold, eds., *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*, (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), xii.

against change, arguing that the mass media “makes it increasingly difficult for presidents to present an appearance of stability and to allow time for policies to mature and for events to respond to their measures.”<sup>12</sup> Restrained by the constitutional framework that calls for the separation of powers, presidents today have little to show for themselves except their speeches. Looking closely at inaugural addresses across time, Edward W. Chester points to Richard Nixon’s second inaugural address as a prime example of how one president explained to the American people a major policy change on a controversial issue. Striving to justify the failure of the Vietnam venture, Nixon stated eloquently, “The time has passed when America will make every other nation’s conflict our own, or make every other nation’s future our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1987, Jeffrey Tulis set a new standard in the study of presidential rhetoric with the publication of *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Tulis creates a new framework in which he categorizes the presidents chronologically, defining three distinct periods in the history of presidential rhetoric. Under the Old Way, defined as the period from the founding of the country until the late 1800’s, presidents rarely spoke in public and rarely addressed Congress directly. When they did speak in public, the early presidents preferred to give formal addresses on such occasions as the inauguration of the president. Under the Middle Way, defined as the period from the late 1800’s to the early twentieth century, presidents used rhetoric as an extension of statesmanship, to be used in moderation. Theodore Roosevelt exemplified the presidents of this period, employing rhetoric as an informational tool that could be used to accompany his major policy pronouncements. Under the New Way, defined as the period from the early twentieth century to the present, presidents have traveled around the country, attempting to rhetorically persuade Congress and the public of the

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<sup>12</sup> James W. Ceaser et al., “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*, (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Chester, “Beyond the Rhetoric: A Look at Presidential Inaugural Addresses,” *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*, (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), 35.

soundness of their positions. Woodrow Wilson set the precedent for such broad usage of presidential rhetoric, stumping far and wide in favor of the League of Nations in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Wilson set such a rigorous schedule for himself on his whistle-stop tour, in fact, that his health suffered drastically and he died shortly thereafter. What makes Tulis' book so radical is not its careful tracing of the history of presidential rhetoric but rather the audacity of the author to present a framework that breaks that history into distinct periods that can be theoretically compared to each other. "Students of the presidency have nearly all regarded the rhetorical presidency as a logical and benign growth of the institution," Tulis declares. "That basic postulate is wrong. The rhetorical presidency signals and constitutes a fundamental transformation of American politics that began at the outset of the twentieth century."<sup>14</sup> Previous studies of the presidency erred by not considering the tremendous impact that rhetoric has had on the presidency. Crisis rhetoric, for example, is no longer indicative of crises alone. The rhetorical presidency provides incentives for presidents to create crises, which in turn encourages the American people to accept crisis rhetoric as business as usual, thereby leaving us vulnerable to manipulative presidents. Crisis incentives often include popularity boosts, bipartisan conformity, and opportunities for wartime power grabs. Tulis worries about this problem, writing, "If crisis politics are now routine, we may be losing the ability as a people to distinguish genuine from spurious crises. Intended to ameliorate crises, the rhetorical presidency is now the creator of crises, or pseudo-crises."<sup>15</sup> As a result, Tulis advises presidents and the public to be wary of the rhetorical presidency and its tendency to shy away from eloquence in favor of crisis rhetoric.

Looking back on the major framework proposed by Tulis in the late 1980's, the authors of the essays in *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency* fiddle at the edges but generally leave the central thesis unchallenged. Martin J. Medhurst announces in the introduction that the intention of the

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 173.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.