

**PERFORMING 'DUBYA':  
GEORGE W. BUSH NARRATIVES  
ON THE POLITICAL AND THEATRICAL STAGES**

by

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This dissertation examines how theatrical performance might offer the political left a model for responding to the communication strategies of the political right through a case study of responses to the George W. Bush administration. I conduct this exploration through a two-part study. In the first part, I establish a theoretical framework by looking to the work of Francis Fukuyama, Bruce McConachie, Brian Boyd and others to identify the common evolutionary and cognitive roots of storytelling and political order. Based on that understanding, I examine the historical development of presidential storytelling and create a rubric for analyzing contemporary presidential performance. The second part of this dissertation is comprised of three chapters, each of which focuses on a particular narrative strategy used by the George W. Bush administration to engender public support for the president and administration policies. I introduce and examine three narrative frameworks: the dynasty narrative, the redemption narrative, and the rescue narrative. In each chapter, I conduct a focused examination of the narrative strategy and how the president performed it. I then identify ways in which the theatrical performances in the case study expose, reject or replace the narratives crafted by Bush’s presidential performance. I conclude each chapter by comparing the theatrical responses to those provided by late night television performances of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

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## PREFACE

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: PRESIDENTIAL STORYTELLING

In *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics* (2009), George Lakoff argues that American political discourse has been recently dominated by radical conservatives who better understand how to exploit the structures of the human brain than their political opponents. Lakoff voices concern that political operatives and politicians, particularly on the political right, appeal to the subconscious level of the American voter in order to promote a particular political agenda and its associated politicians (10). The right's use of simple and recognizable narratives to engage with voters unconsciously typifies that understanding and allows them to win elections and frame debates. He suggests that the left's inability to counter these strategies successfully comes from the progressive tendency to privilege tactics rooted in rational persuasion over unconscious cognitive processing in vying for votes. Lakoff, and other scholars such as the similarly-minded Drew Westen, call on the political left to shape counter strategies rooted in the understanding that the mechanisms through which the human brain understands reality are largely unconscious.

For Lakoff, the electoral successes of George W. Bush exemplify the right's superior approach. Of course, it is not surprising that the American presidency might serve as an obvious location for testing the validity of these concerns. Successful storytelling and mythmaking are critical to the maintenance of political power. Historian Evan Cornog addresses the long history of the crafting of presidential stories in his book *The Power and the Story* (2004). He surveys stories throughout American history that have helped elect presidents, support and oppose presidential actions, and reflect on presidential administrations in retrospect. As his study

suggests, these narratives can be large or small, complicated or simplistic, rooted in fact or completely fictional, but they have long been critical in attaining and maintaining presidential authority.

In contemporary America, presidential stories are told in a particular brand of performance promulgated through mass communication media. Stella Bruzzi's book *New Documentary* (2006) includes an extensive examination into the performance of the contemporary presidency as it is shaped by documentary film and television. She cites Robert Drew's 1960 documentary *Primary* as foundational. The film followed presidential candidates John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey during their primary campaigns in Wisconsin. From that groundbreaking film, to the famous advantages Kennedy enjoyed over Richard Nixon in the first televised debate, Bruzzi suggests the performance of the presidency on the screen helped to create a new form of politician. She writes of a "more performative idea of the politician: one who is constructed with the spectator in mind and whose media image is not automatically presumed to be a direct correlative of his off-screen personality" (157). In the end, Bruzzi concludes that, "the president's image is an effective metaphor for the state of the presidency within public consciousness" (162).

In a 1962 interview regarding his film *Primary*, producer Robert Drew explains that in creating the film he discovered important emerging elements of American political journalism:

Reporting in television and the reporting I had done were word logic based – that is they were lectures with picture illustrations or interviews which is the same thing, [as saying] that real life never got out of the film, never came through the television set. And [we decided] that we would have to drop word logic and find a dramatic logic in which things really happened. If we could do that we could have a whole new basis for a new journalism – which is kind of hard to define, but I'll try: it would be a theatre without actors it would be plays without playwrights it would be reporting without summary and opinion. It would be the ability to look in on people's lives at crucial times from which you could deduce certain things and see a kind of truth that can only be gotten by personal experience. (Drew)

In the time since Drew's film, many political scholars, historians, and performance theorists have arrived at similar conclusions regarding how contemporary presidential administrations use conventions of storytelling and performance to legitimize their authority, to maintain support of the voting (viewing) public, and to set their actions within particular moral and ideological frameworks.

If Lakoff is correct, then I believe that the left might look to other cultural sites for successful storytelling crafted for unconscious cognitive processing. In undertaking this dissertation, I hypothesize that theatrical performances (and the electronic media parodies of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert) may offer a template for effective responses to political narratives promoting the presidency of George W. Bush. In order to test that hypothesis herein, I offer a two-part analysis, organized into five chapters.

In the first two chapters, I synthesize a theoretical and historical framework for understanding the relationships among the American presidency, storytelling, and contemporary performance. In chapter 1, I seek to establish a coherent approach for exploring the intersection between narrative storytelling and political power, examine the historical roots of presidential storytelling, and locate and describe the three factors that have shaped presidential storytelling over the past century. In chapter 2, I craft a methodology for analyzing contemporary presidential performance by exploring the political precedents of contemporary presidential performance set by Ronald Reagan, identifying useful cognitive links between contemporary performance and storytelling, and establishing three categories of presidential performance that support contemporary presidential storytelling.

The second part of this dissertation is comprised of three chapters, each of which focuses on a particular narrative strategy used by the George W. Bush administration to engender public

support for the president and administration policies. I introduce and examine three narrative frameworks: the dynasty narrative, the redemption narrative, and the rescue narrative. In each chapter, I conduct a focused examination of the narrative strategy and how the president performed it. I then identify ways in which the theatrical performances in the case study expose, reject or replace the narratives crafted by Bush's presidential performance. I conclude each chapter by comparing the theatrical responses to those provided by late night television performances of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

Recent studies of the American presidency originate from divergent ideological perspectives yet arrive together to affirm the presidency's expanding influence in American culture. From fields of study throughout the social sciences and the humanities it is well agreed that the political power of the presidency since the New Deal dwarfs its previous authority, and the power of the office extends well beyond the limits of the executive branch articulated in law. The presidency wields power over broader culture and is supported by it. American schoolchildren learn the name of the president at very young ages. Doctors check basic mental competence by asking patients the year and the name of the president. Americans mark eras and years based on who was the president.

In their book *Presidential Greatness* (2000), Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis suggest the positive promise of a more powerful presidency:

American History has demonstrated that moral democratic leadership plays a critical part in affirming the better angels of the American people. Now, as always, the vitality of American democracy depends on popular and partisan presidential leadership that can perform the conventional yet spectacular task of giving new meaning to the proposition that a nation of individuals can pursue happiness with dignity and responsibility. (243)

In her book *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (2008), Dana Nelson articulates the negative, pervasive influence of the presidency:

Because the president has come to symbolize both our democratic process and our national power, we tend to see him simultaneously as democracy's heart (he will unify the citizenry) and its avenging sword (he will protect us from all external threats). Those beliefs, inculcated in us from our earliest days in school, reinforced by both popular culture and media coverage of government, politics, and foreign affairs, make us *want* to give the president more power, regardless of the constitutional checks and balances we also learned to treasure as schoolchildren. (2)

The expanding power of the presidency may be feared, as Dana Nelson has argued, or, as Landy and Milkis suggest, the presidency may possess great potential for positive change.

The fundamental rationale that drives my study is that if theatrical drama provides a significant source for performance strategies that support or counter the maintenance of such vast power as that contained within an expanding executive branch of the United States government, then these works should be explored by academics sensitive to the modalities of theatre and performance.

In understanding the links between narrative storytelling and the contemporary American presidency, my aims are: to identify a coherent approach to exploring the intersection between narrative storytelling and political power; to present a context for contemporary presidential storytelling by providing a broad overview of presidential storytelling in American history beginning with the political origins of the institution; and to locate and describe the historical roots of three factors that define contemporary presidential storytelling. In the first section of this chapter I employ an evolutionary approach to explain the inherent links between storytelling and political power. In the second section I present a brief history that describes the historical origins of the office and a series of anecdotes that typify how narrative strategies were used to testify to presidential character in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I conclude this chapter by identifying and describing three distinctive (yet overlapping) factors that shape contemporary

presidential storytelling: rapidly changing communication media, exponential expansions of executive power, and a fundamental disparity between the effective storytelling of the American political right and deficient storytelling by the American political left.

## 1.1 EVOLUTION, POLITICAL ORDER, AND STORYTELLING

Examining the links between political power and storytelling requires traveling a particularly well-beaten path. A comprehensive study of such literature would necessitate an expansive, world-wide encyclopedia covering stories, both prominent and obscure, for countless cultures across the globe and across many eras. From Western history's recorded origins of drama in Ancient Greece (*Oedipus Rex*) to contemporary films of popular acclaim (*The King's Speech*), stories about political leadership have been told, preserved and re-told many times over. In order to examine the relationship between particular narratives performed by and about the American presidency, I believe that it is worthwhile to identify a consistent way to understand and discuss political power and storytelling.

Evolutionary approaches to various aspects of human culture rest with a fundamental idea clearly articulated by Bruce McConachie in his recent essay "An Evolutionary Perspective on Play, Performance, and Ritual." Early in his essay, McConachie establishes:

Because it took *Homo sapiens* several million years before our hominid ancestors separated from other primates and many thousands of years after that before our senses, brains, and motor responses arrived at their current capabilities, we must seek to ground our interest in organism-environment interactions, abstract thought and high culture, and even ethical judgments – all of which are a significant part of play, performance, and ritual – in our evolutionary past. (34)

I approach this work from the premise that the complexity of human civilization reflects the evolutionary advantages of successful behavioral adaptations exchanged cooperatively within members of the species and handed down in shorthand from generation to generation (e.g., the wheel must not be invented by every person or by every generation). Thus, there have been evolutionary advantages for the individual and the species in adapting toward continually more complicated models of social behavior, including both the configurations of political order and in the conventions of storytelling. While my examination is not exclusively derived from this approach, I believe that this premise provides the best foundation to articulate and examine my hypothesis that theatrical narratives of the presidency can counter and expose narratives constructed by presidential administrations. I also believe that using this evolutionary approach allows me-- without being drawn into semantic disputes that can encumber interdisciplinary work--to illuminate specific connections between configurations of political order and conventions of storytelling that have been traditionally examined by (or “owned by”) scholars in a variety of fields (political science, history, theatre, performance studies, communications, English, sociology).

In his 2011 book, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, Francis Fukuyama explores the prehistorical and historical origins of political institutions. In this large volume (the second, concluding volume is forthcoming), Fukuyama employs evolutionary theory to account for the development of prehistoric political organization and the continuing impact of human nature on political organization. Well-known for his (in)famous 1989 essay “The End of History?” Fukuyama grounds this more recent work in human prehistory to set the stage for his extensive chronicle of human political order. He says his purpose “is less to present a history of political development than to analyze some of the

factors that led to the emergence of certain key political institutions” (22). Undertaking a remarkably ambitious project, Fukuyama argues that an accurate examination of the origins of human political institutions requires the understanding that these institutions originate from human nature that can be understood through evolutionary science. He objects to the widely-held notions (by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, for examples) that the “natural” state of humanity is individual and isolated and that social institutions develop with civilization. Instead, he explains that overwhelming evidence from natural science demonstrates the opposite: “Both society and conflict have existed for as long as there have been human beings, because human beings are by nature both social and competitive animals” (25). He points to humanity’s primate cousins, who practice rudimentary forms of politics as the primary example of the biological origins of hierarchical power. From the study of primate behavior to the recent history of relatively isolated human tribe cultures, Fukuyama employs a wide variety of evidence in order to demonstrate that human nature can serve as a suitable reference point for understanding social behavior. After all, as he points out, “widely separated human societies have come up with strikingly similar solutions to the problem of political order” (45).

Fukuyama synthesizes this evidence to identify four critical “natural building blocks” that generate the full range of human political orders (43). These building blocks are basically hard-wired in the human brain as emotional mechanisms that promote certain kinds of social behavior. I present Fukuyama’s building blocks here to create reference points for understanding the nature of the human political order and governing institutions.

Fukuyama’s first building block identifies the default modes of human sociability as natural inclinations towards *kin selection* and *reciprocal altruism*. These are innate emotional reactions that prompt our protectiveness over our own family members and our tendency to

associate with individuals whom we can help and who help us. For example, research has demonstrated that advanced primates protect genetic relations and, when given time, will gravitate toward individuals who demonstrate trustworthiness (35). At the biological level, these default modes of sociability derive from our innate interests in self-survival and the survival of our genes. Another way of looking at these default modes of sociability is that one derives from genetics and the other from environment. To some extent, these default modes can compete with one another, and that conflict manifests when the size of the political unit increases. In recent American political history, these modes can be seen in conflict over the diffusion of political power to ethnic minorities and women.

Fukuyama's second building block deals with the human interest in *finding causation in invisible or transcendental forces*. This idea rests on the notion that human senses developed in ways that allowed individuals to benefit from making cause and effect observations. In order to accommodate effects without immediately identifiable causes, the human mind adapted to include the capacity for abstraction. This capacity for abstraction encouraged the inclination to find causes in invisible or transcendental forces. This inclination produces complex political organizational structures rooted in forces like religion and destiny. In other words, there are evolutionary origins for the human drive to find out why things are the way they are, and there are evolutionary origins for the human tendency to explain the unexplained with causes that include abstract thinking. I will return to this notion in greater detail in chapter 2, where I explore religion and ritual in relation to presidential performance.

Fukuyama's third building block is what he calls the *proclivity for norm following*. This is connected to the pleasures associated with belonging and "fitting in." Fukuyama argues that this desire is rooted in human emotion and not in reason. Subsequently, he links this aspect of

human nature with the irrational conservatism that sometimes arises during extended periods of relative political equilibrium. Unsurprisingly, he hints that the contemporary American political system exhibits some symptoms of this irrational conservatism and warns that it brings danger of political decay. While I expect that he will address this more extensively in the unpublished second volume, this notion echoes analyses by contemporary scholars like the cognitive scientist George Lakoff and political psychologist Drew Westen, whose ideas I address in the final section of this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

Finally, Fukuyama identifies the human *desire for recognition* as his fourth building block. This includes the desire for individual validation within the small group and small group validation within the larger group. In other words, we want to be recognized as an important member of our family, and we want our family to be recognized as an important member of the neighborhood. Fukuyama says that this building block provides the ultimate foundation of political authority. He explains:

Finally, the desire for recognition ensures that politics will never be reducible to simple economic self-interest. Human beings make constant judgments about the intrinsic value, worth, or dignity of other people or institutions, and they organize themselves into hierarchies based on those valuations. Political power ultimately rests upon recognition – the degree to which a leader or institution is regarded as legitimate and can command the respect of a group of followers. (45)

I will rely on the prominence of this building block throughout the rest of this chapter. I argue that storytelling offers the most efficient and prevalent means for American political leaders to legitimize their authority and command the respect of their followers.

Before continuing, I must qualify that there are limits to taking this approach to understanding political order. Fukuyama carefully points out that political institutions and behavior cannot be fully explained and understood on the basis of the neuroscience alone. As he puts it, “human political institutions are transmitted across time culturally rather than genetically

and are subject to a great deal more intentional design than biological evolution” (49). Still, Fukuyama argues that human nature establishes the frameworks on which the peculiarities of political institutions evolve and function. I believe that understanding the evolutionary basis for the workings of political order illuminates the undeniable interconnectivity between the workings of that order and storytelling. In order to establish this, I turn to a complementary work that looks at the development and function of storytelling through an evolutionary lens.

In his 2009 book *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Brian Boyd considers the evolutionary origins and value of storytelling. Boyd’s work is grounded in the premise that evolutionary origins and functions of human behavior provide a robust framework for understanding how various aspects of human culture develop, function and interact. In his study, Boyd lays out an argument for examining narrative storytelling through the lens of scientific understandings of the human brain – particularly as it has evolved through natural selection. He suggests that this approach toward studying culture might be called *evocriticism*. Boyd’s work demonstrates that storytelling is an evolutionary adaptation that appeals to humanity’s social intelligence and desire for mutual understanding (382). Literary fiction is the end point/target of his full study, but in order to arrive at his conclusions, he traces the origins and function of both narrative storytelling and play in the contexts of evolutionary competition, cooperation and natural selection. In this section, I will forge into the same territory, consider his examinations of both narrative storytelling and play, and extract useful terminology and ideas for the remainder of this study.

In tracing the evolutionary development of storytelling, Boyd identifies the social benefits available to an individual organism in telling or listening to a story. Obviously, the sharing of information between individuals is evolutionarily significant. To reference a

rudimentary example, I ask the reader to imagine a group of mammals traveling across countryside. As a predator approaches, one individual member of the group may motion her arms or torso in order to alert her counterparts to the danger of the approaching predator. This gesture may reference a predator and efficiently communicate: “There’s a predator! Look out!” This ability to communicate the warning signal is extremely valuable to the survival of the group of animals. And the individual who observes the predator and alerts the rest proves to be a valuable member of the group.

For cognitive neuropsychologist Merlin Donald, such communication exemplifies this capacity as foundational to mimesis. According to Donald:

A mimetic act is basically a motor performance that reflects the perceived event structure of the world, and its motoric aspect makes its content a public, that is, a potentially cultural expression. (283)

Donald notes this capacity may have developed in human ancestors two million years ago and led to the slow accumulation of human knowledge.

Such mimetic acts are most valuable, however, in the immediate situation and can only contribute to cultural accumulation of knowledge over long periods of time. Donald claims that human ancestors learned to use fire, for example, only in single applications over the course of hundreds of thousands of years (283). The gestures in my example, for instance, address the presence of the predator with great effectiveness but cannot immediately address the choices that led the group to the dangerous place in the first place. Consider how another individual might adapt to improve upon the first’s ability had he recognized that place as the previous location of a predator, and then been able to communicate a similar alert (“A predator was there last time!”). He might have prevented the group from traveling into the vicinity of the predator. This new,

more useful mimetic act requires the efficient introduction of past tense, and is fundamentally an act of storytelling.

For the listeners, the evolutionary advantage of listening is clear: having more information, they are less likely to be consumed by the predator. For the storyteller, he would demonstrate great value to the group and would likely reap the usual rewards of social status: security and sexual success. This basic storytelling ability might provide recognition from other members of the species.

This example illustrates Boyd's explanation of the origin of narrative as an advantageous adaptation allowing individuals to communicate the significance of sensory events to other humans by ordering and relaying them— through competition or cooperation. According to his explanation, despite the fact that sensory perception of events actually makes up the bulk of human experience, narrative allows us to order and share those perceptions for social purposes (159).

Boyd continues to trace the development of human narrative by explaining that while narrative employs multi-sensory modes of communication, the development of language makes narrative “more precise, efficient, and flexible” (159). These characteristics contribute to increasing sophistication of storytelling. The precision of information to be communicated increases the number of variables that can be considered. In our previous example, language would allow the individual alerting the group to communicate additional information, such as: what kind of predator, what time of day it was last seen, and if it was alone. Language also allows this information to be transmitted and understood very quickly with little effort. Finally, it can be customized for particular audiences and the particular moments. Fukuyama echoes this line of thinking in noting that the development of language both promotes cooperation and

demands cognitive development (35). From his perspective the development of language contributes to greater complexity in the political order, too.<sup>1</sup>

Narrative sophistication also gives value to the capacity of the individual to filter information efficiently, both as listener and teller. In presenting this strategic narration, Boyd points out that we filter out sensory items that do not seem relevant to the frameworks of our understanding (172). In other words, if a storyteller wants people to remain interested in her story, knowing what to leave out is probably just as important as knowing what to put in. In our rudimentary example, the simple storyteller that says “A predator was there last time, when I was wandering on that cloudy day when I was tired because my child was crying all night because he was hungry” might have his primary message of warning lost in the longer story. The superfluous descriptive information may undermine his recognition from the group, because the listener receives less value in listening to such details relative to the investment of time and attention.

Nonetheless, Boyd points out that while good stories economize on relating sensory information based on events, we have “an endless fascination with character information, since it helps us to predict the behavior of those we interact with and remains relatively stable over time” (165). Thus we filter out information that is not relevant, but we want important information relating to the personality and background of actors within the related events. In the rudimentary example, the group will listen to the storyteller if he has proved useful in the past, and will be unlikely to do so if he has proven to be a liar. In contemporary legal terms, we rely on “character witnesses.” And as we will see throughout this study, testimony of character within presidential

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<sup>1</sup> None of this is to say that the robust flexibility of language undermines the importance of non-verbal mimesis in storytelling or the political order. Mother Courage’s silent scream as done by Helene Weigel in Brecht’s production or John F. Kennedy, Jr.’s “salute” of his slain father’s funeral casket come to mind as moments of non-verbal yet highly sophisticated storytelling.

narratives may be the most obvious component of storytelling's political utility. In summary, Boyd says:

Narrative arises from the advantages of communication in social species. It benefits audiences, who can choose better what course of action to take on the basis of strategic information, and it benefits tellers, who earn credit in the social information exchange and gain in terms of attention and status. That combination of benefits, for the teller and the told, and the intensity of social monitoring in our species, explain why narrative has become so central to human life. (176)

In this way, Boyd locates the evolutionary advantage, and therefore, the continual human interest in narrative storytelling as an adaptive benefit.

Boyd makes preliminary links between narrative storytelling and the political order in addressing the social hierarchy. He assumes that the social hierarchy itself develops as an adaptation to make the dynamics over precedence more efficient. In other words, behavioral conventions regarding which individual(s) rule reflect an adaptation that mitigates the need for the otherwise endless and violent struggle for power. Since he also demonstrates that it is advantageous for individuals to pay attention to others that seem to have the most useful information to share, then it follows that those individuals that can be deemed to have the best information stand to gain a great deal in the social hierarchy. He emphasizes this point by citing primate studies that show in many primate species, social status is attained through superior grooming skills or heightened abilities to relate to and communicate with other member of groups, while in most species, individual size often dictates social power (109). This basic understanding of storytelling as an advantageous adaptation – especially as related to social hierarchy – reflects my own understanding that successful storytelling is critical to securing and maintaining political power.

Narrative storytelling, of course, is more sophisticated than my simple example allows. The operations of political storytelling, like most kinds of storytelling, are more complicated

than the values of reporting shared information or the rewards of individual attention.

Obviously, there are serious questions about what information is best and the actions to take based on the information. Yet perhaps the greatest complication in the development of storytelling is fiction. I suggest that effective political storytelling, like other forms of myth-making, necessitates a successful negotiation between reporting shared information in narrative form and playing with the imagination of the teller and the listener. I continue to borrow lines of thought from Brian Boyd in examining his evolutionary explanation for narrative fiction.

Boyd ties imaginative storytelling to human (and animal) “play,” an idea most easily recognized as a favorite pastime of small human children, but plentiful in adult human and high order animal behavior as well. He concisely explains the origins, function, and value of play:

Evolution can install general guidelines for action – nature’s factory settings – but for some behaviors fine-tuned choices and wider ranges of options that can be deployed at short and context-sensitive notice make a decisive difference. This applies particularly to the volatile sphere of social relations, and especially to the most urgent situations, flight and fight. Such behaviors can be fine-tuned by experience and the range of options extended by exploratory action. Creatures with stronger motivations to practice such behaviors and to explore new options in advance will fare better than those without. The more pleasure that creatures have in play in safe contexts, the more they will happily expend energy in mastering skills needed in urgent or volatile situations, in attack, defense, and social competitions and cooperation. This explains why in the human case we particularly enjoy play that develops skills needed in flight (chase, tag, running) and fight (rough-and-tumble, throwing as a form of attack at a distance), in recovery of balance (skiing, surfing, skateboarding), and in individual and team games. (92)

Like other adaptations, play can aid in both cooperation and competition as exemplified in both team and individual games. These games reflect the evolutionary advantages gained through mastery of individual competition and group cooperation. Play serves the purpose of preparing the individual for “volatile” situations that demand other competition or cooperation. Not surprisingly, the more socially developed the species, the more the play revolves around volatile

social situations in addition to violent survival scenarios. Boyd argues that narrative fiction provides a playground where such preparation takes place.

Boyd focuses on three central advantages provided by imagined, hypothetical narratives (193). First, fiction provides simulation for volatile situations that may otherwise prompt debilitating psychological paralysis. For examples, we need not go farther than the heightened events ever present in drama. Stories about sex, violence, and death were not invented merely for television ratings. Fictional stories prepare individuals for critical moments involving sexual competition, violent conflict, and deaths of loved companions. Second, fiction offers a high ratio of high-stakes events relative to narrative time. Unfettered by the pace of reality, fiction can economize time. Such efficiencies are obviously evolutionarily advantageous, because at the low cost of suspension of disbelief, the individual has effectively simulated a series of volatile situations that would take years to experience firsthand. Finally, that efficiency itself trains the individual to process important information very quickly. While reality is not usually as efficiently structured as fiction, the ability to process a volatile situation quickly is clearly advantageous.

The theatre, and its “plays,” provides an obvious location for such play in modern human culture. In the appendix to his 1949 *Idea of a Theater*, Francis Fergusson explicitly connects animal play with the structure of action in theatrical drama. He employs the term “histrionic sensibility” to describe the way the human mind perceives action similar to the way the human ear perceives music. In animal play, he finds a convenient way to illustrate his ideas:

Kittens in their play seem to be using something like our histrionic sensibility. They directly perceive each other’s actions: stalking an imagined quarry; the bluff and formal defiance which precedes a fight; flight in terror; the sudden indifference that ends the play. Their perception of each other’s actions is itself mimetic, a sympathetic response of the whole psyche, and may be expressed more or less completely and immediately in bodily changes, postures, and movements. (251)

Fergusson's equation of mimetic art and animal play predates a great deal of research in cognitive and evolutionary sciences but corroborates the evolutionary value of mimesis as play.

How do the evolutionary attributes of play relate to political leadership? There are two obvious ways. First, fiction can provide a useful framework to support general cultural constructions of political power. For example, countless myths affirm the value of political order over anarchy by simulating violent struggles over political precedence and demonstrate the value of the wise monarch by simulating the pleasures associated with political security. Second, fictional stories can also maintain the political power by specific individuals. These stories boost the "character" of specific individuals and encourage the value in following him. Once the "character" is established, then the behavior in the future volatile situation is assumed to correspond.

Often these two kinds of stories combine efficiently to focus on the heirs to progenitor rulers in ancestral political orders (e.g., Tolkien's *Return of the King*). Fukuyama links these kinds of stories to his third building block: *finding causation in invisible or transcendental forces*. He argues that the expansion of the political order beyond small family "bands" is typically enabled by leaders who claim to possess the power of communicating with dead relatives (66). The ghosts or spirits of deceased ancestors can provide explanation for all sorts of events, so individuals who can communicate with them consequently have valuable information and should be followed. Furthermore, this dynamic facilitates the broadening of kin selection, since genetic relationships are typically defined by closet common ancestors, making previous generations relevant increases the number of kin for any individual.

These combined stories also exhibit a value inherent in narrative strategy as Boyd describes it. Effective storytellers strategize to "not only recount events but invent and shape

them to appeal to an open-ended audience in their own time and place -- and perhaps all times and places” (172). Thus, effective political storytelling promotes not only the individual who currently holds power, but also strengthens the value in the political system at large. This characteristic reflects Fukuyama’s fourth building block: *proclivity for norm following*. Combining all of these ideas, I conclude that effective political stories of this kind rely on the value of deceased ancestors/predecessors, serve as positive character studies for the current leader, and reinforce the future of the current political order.

In chapter 2, I will return to Fukuyama and Boyd in examining how presidential narratives are performed. I will also incorporate additional ideas from Bruce McConachie, particularly regarding his distinctions between play, performance, and ritual. First, however, I believe it necessary to contextualize the contemporary presidency by looking at the origins and development of the institution, the history of presidential storytelling, and three factors that shape contemporary presidential storytelling.

## **1.2 ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY AND EARLY PRESIDENTIAL STORYTELLING**

Before the ratification of the Constitution, the government of the United States of America functioned under a set of rules referred to as the Articles of Confederation. These rules largely codified the mechanisms that aided the loose union of colonies in conceiving, declaring, and securing their independence from Great Britain. The resultant national government was not only significantly weaker than the government of the constituent states, but it also stood in stark contrast to the monarchical government of Great Britain. There was no singular ruler who

served as head of state. Instead, a congress ruled the fledgling national state by committee. The arrangement provided the new nation with plentiful problems. Political scientists Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson address three particular economic problems that faced that political order: troubled commerce between individual states, the ability to pay national debts incurred during the war, and relationships with foreign governments (6). Against this backdrop, the Congress of the United States called for a constitutional convention in May of 1787.

The new Constitution of the United States of America established a stronger central government with its authority (ostensibly deriving from the people in its opening clause) separated into three branches of government: the legislative, the judicial and the executive. The design of the executive branch proved one of the most contentious of the convention's tasks. Freed from British monarchical rule not quite a decade prior, the delegates were divided over the wisdom of robust, centralized executive rule. Yet, strengthening the national government marked the purpose of the convention. The problems caused by the lack of central power under the Articles of Confederation were obvious, but a broadly shared fear of tyranny accompanied the inclination to solve all those problems with the instillation of a strong executive.

This dichotomy spurred a unique set of specific questions that dominated the executive debate. Would it be composed of a committee of individuals or singularly embodied in one chief executive? Would the executive hold veto power over legislation? Would the executive be chosen by the legislature or by popular vote? Would the executive wield the power to wage war or make treaties? Would the office holder be paid a salary? How long would the executive office holder(s) serve? How might the office holder(s) be removed from office? Who would succeed office holder(s) that needed to be replaced?

The ratified document answered many of these issues in vesting the executive power in a singular “President of the United States of America.” Article II of the Constitution established the executive branch of the new government. Section 1 defined the term of office at four years, created a vice-president to become president if necessary, described the election process under the Electoral College and the United States Congress, established eligibility criteria for election, prescribed presidential compensation that could not be increased or decreased during a term of office, and provided a text for the Oath of Office. Section 2 made the president the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and chief of all executive departments, bestowed on the president the power of the pardon, the authority to enter into international treaties, and the responsibility to appoint judges and ambassadors (the latter two upon advice and consent of the Senate). Section 3 required the president to give periodic updates to Congress (what would later become the annual “state of the union” address), granted him the ability to convene and adjourn both houses of Congress, receive ambassadors, ensure all laws are faithfully executed and commission all officers of the United States. Section 4 stated that all civil officers of the United States (including both the president and vice-president) shall be removed from office by impeachment for and conviction of treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors.

In just over 1,000 words, this article instituted a singular executive office holder to be chief executive, commander-in-chief, and head of state. Though much of the responsibility was to be checked by the other two branches, the singular office holder of the presidency took on some powers previously held by European monarchs. Thus, in the few years between the declaration of independence and the constitutional convention, these American leaders reestablished some of what had been lost in the rejection of monarchical rule. This should not be entirely surprising since, as individuals, they had thrived in that system most of their lives. Yet

the architects of American constitutional government imagined a limited executive distinctive from a king or queen. The president needed to maintain the effectiveness of central power lacking in rule by committee, but also needed to remain incapable of tyrannical despotism. The famous checks and balances contained within the structure of the new government were intended to be a fail-safe against tyranny of any kind. However, historians generally agree that the eventual consensus to place the powers of the executive branch into one person arose only because there was implicit agreement among the delegates that George Washington would serve as the first President and wisely set the precedents for future presidents.

The president had to possess both the nobility and stature of sovereign leadership as well as the limits of a citizen whose office would be easily ceded to an elected successor. In order to legitimize his authority in the new system, the officeholder needed the gravitas of a king or queen but only the same rights of any other full citizen. Nelson and Milkis echo countless historians in pointing out that George Washington's reputation as both a triumphant war hero and a reluctant political leader made him the obvious choice for executing the new office. But his reputation also served to inspire compromise between the factions favoring weaker and stronger executives and to legitimize the authority of the institution (26). In Fukuyama's terms, Washington's recognition among the nation's leaders legitimized his authority, and, therefore, the authority of the institution itself.

At the time of the constitutional convention, Washington had already been a popular national hero as the general that won the Revolutionary War. His election and re-election are both considered to have been unanimous. According to Joseph Pika and John Anthony Maltese, Washington's "major contribution to the presidency was to imbue the office with nearly mythical stature" (97). His reputation provided much of this stature, but he and his advisers also

established new rituals selectively derived from European monarchy. By relying on his reputation and echoing the rituals of antecedent leaders, Washington set important precedents for garnering presidential legitimacy. These precedents became all the more important for presidents whose elections were far from unanimous.

From its construction, the institution of American presidency has relied on the personal reputations of the persons who hold the office. And I argue that the character testimony inherent in narrative storytelling provides the means for this political recognition. In the remainder of this section, I present a series of political anecdotes to evidence how this assertion has applied in American presidential history. These examples are culled from a few respected and popular sources in the vast literature on the subject. The anecdotes will also serve as background for the evolving context of the contemporary presidency that I introduce in the final section of the chapter.

Washington was succeeded in office by his vice-president, John Adams, following the latter's defeat of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in a contentious national election of 1796. Jefferson became Adams' vice-president prior to defeating him in 1800 during unprecedented levels of partisan discord. Historian Edward Larson's popular 2007 book *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* provides an interesting account of the events of that groundbreaking political campaign. Despite the fact that the conventions of the time prevented the candidates from directly campaigning for themselves, Larson illuminates that election as a precursor for contemporary campaigns. Over the course of his account, Larson finds the origins of full-fledged partisan rancor in presidential politics. Among other significant details, Larson describes the first widespread, organizational vilification of a sitting president by a political opposition: the inverse of the mythologizing

Washington. Jefferson's supporters suggested Adams intended to restore British monarchy. President Adams' supporters tried to paint Jefferson as an atheist usurper.

According to Dana Nelson, the ugliness of the partisan conflict between Adams and Jefferson supporters prompted some broad national concern about the future of the constitutional government without George Washington (40). This anxiety may have been heightened since the first president died in 1799. Like other historians, Nelson argues that these concerns helped fuel the popularity of George Washington mythology that spread around the country in the years following his death. One of the most successful works of presidential mythmaking of the time was Mason Locke Weems' mostly-fictional biography of the first U.S. president. This "biography" serves as the introduction of what may be the most famous story about any American president: the one that ends with the boy George Washington telling the truth about chopping down his father's cherry tree because he could not tell a lie (Nelson 40). This particular instance of mythification served to strengthen the political system at large by calming national anxiety and maintaining faith in the political order and general civil agreement. Perhaps the elevation of George Washington to mythological heights even within the lifetimes of people who were alive during his administration helped turned presidential campaigns into attempts to deify/demonize presidential contenders.

Another major change in electoral politics occurred in 1828 when candidates to the Electoral College were first chosen directly based on the promise that they would vote for particular candidates. This electoral change resulted in an even greater sense that popularity among all voters was critical to winning the presidency. The election pitted the incumbent president, John Quincy Adams, against the man whom he had defeated four years earlier, Andrew Jackson.

Like Washington before him, Andrew Jackson had been a general who led Americans against the British. In Jackson's case, he led the American forces at the battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. Historians are quick to point out that the battle he won actually occurred after the war was officially over (the treaty had been signed days before the news could arrive in Louisiana), but that fact did not seem to undermine its significance in Jackson's support. Jackson's backstory of military victory served as tangible evidence of Jackson's effective leadership and emphasized his specific preparation to be commander-in-chief. And the story of the famous military hero taking on the role of the president would not end, of course, with Andrew Jackson. William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy are all obvious examples of this kind of story.<sup>2</sup>

In *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (1996), Kathleen Hall Jamieson describes the campaign that supported Andrew Jackson:

Throughout the campaign of 1828, Jackson's supporters painted him as "The Modern Cincinnatus," "The Farmer of Tennessee," "The Second Washington," and "The Hero of Two Wars." Portraits of Jackson in general's uniform astride a horse were carried in processions alongside portraits of him in the clothing of a Tennessee farmer, hickory cane in hand. (6)

According to Jamieson, Adams' supporters tried to counter this character attestation with charges that Jackson was an unschooled slaveholder who did not work his own farm and was much too young to have actually fought in the Revolutionary War. Additionally, Jamieson describes a handbill campaign that charged Jackson with ruthlessly executing war deserters and others who deserved better. Jackson's supporters were able to counter this effort successfully by distributing

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, such a story doesn't always trump other forces in presidential campaigns: consider the failed campaigns of Winfield Scott, John Kerry, and John McCain for examples.

similar handbills that furthered these claims to the extreme by stating that Jackson, if elected, was so dangerous that he might, upon a disagreement with a state, hang the governor and legislators of that state and “devour” them prior to leaving town (7). In this way, the Jackson supporters were able to defend against a negative character narrative by transforming the story from testimony to satire. In effect, the story told by Adams’ supporters ricocheted and reflected poorly on their candidate. This phenomenon – I will refer to it hereafter as a *narrative backfire* – recurs throughout the history of competing presidential narratives. It has been particularly well-utilized by current partisans who best understand how to utilize narratives.

In his 1998 book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel links Jackson’s popularity to his appeal to American masculinity. He argues that Jackson’s perceived virility qualifies him for the office by prompting recognition from the population whose support he needs. Kimmel paints Jackson as successfully harnessing masculine rage at “feminizing” influences personified in the educated, European-influenced, Easterner John Quincy Adams (26). According to this reading of Jackson’s story, his orphan background left him subject to being raised by women. Therefore, his military success represented not only a heroic victory but a triumph over feminine influences and made him a full man. Kimmel illustrates his basic premise by pointing out how Jackson’s perspective on the Native Americans was rooted in him viewing them as his children and himself as their “Father” (26). Along the same lines, he references the manner in which Jackson refers to the National Bank, which he sought to destroy as, “the Mother Bank” and a “Hydra of Corruption” (26). Kimmel’s analysis reveals an element of presidential character testimony that I will explore in greater detail in later chapters: virility as a character testimony that plays to kin selection and following norms. Kimmel’s perspective is also

particularly useful in this dissertation since he makes connections between the language used in public discourse and the character testimony contained in background narrative.

Jackson's elected successor did not have as much success. In 1840, President Martin Van Buren was challenged for re-election by William Henry Harrison who, like Jackson and Washington, had been a military general. However, his military record was relatively unknown prior to the campaign, so the mythology associated with military victory basically needed to be manufactured, though it was not fictional. According to Jamieson, this is most easily evidenced by the famous slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," whereby the name of the "famous" battle stood in for the name that belonged on the top of the ticket. Additionally, Jamieson reports that for the first time in presidential campaign history, the imagery associated with campaign pamphlet and posters consisted of icons related specifically to the candidate instead of national symbols (9). For candidate Harrison, one of these symbols was the log cabin, and its use in this campaign marked the introduction of a recurring central image testifying to the personal character of many presidential candidates to follow.

According to Jamieson, the prominence of the log cabin originated from an attempt at negative testimony about Harrison by supporters of incumbent President Martin Van Buren:

Disparaging Harrison's fitness for the White House, *The Baltimore Republican* contended that he would be content in a log cabin with a jug of cider and a military pension. Harrison's supporters appropriated the log cabin and cider to transform the wealthy son of a governor into a farmer and backwoodsman. The symbol of the log cabin was a potent one for it identified Harrison with the pioneers who cut the country from the wilderness and with rural voters still residing in log cabins. (9)

In the attempt at telling a hypothetical and derogatory story about Harrison retiring to a log cabin in order to drink and collect his battle-won government pension, Van Buren's supporters suffered a narrative backfire and inadvertently painted Harrison as a tough pioneer with simple tastes. Harrison's supporters recognized the value in these images and reclaimed them for their

campaign. Michael Kimmel notes that these symbols – the log cabin and the cider jug – symbolized the “humble birth of a self-made man of the people” and an “alliance with the traditional artisanal work world” (28). In our contemporary political terminology, one might simply say they made him “jus’ folks.” By introducing the log cabin as an important image, the campaign created a shorthand background for many character narratives to come.

One of the primary reasons for the continued prominence of the log cabin in the popular imagery of the American presidency is its association with Abraham Lincoln. Like Washington, Lincoln’s stature has risen to practical mythology and both the general public and historians consider him to be near the greatest of all American presidents. Yet the roots of that mythology derive from his political campaigns. As Evan Cornog informs, Lincoln’s supporters proclaimed their candidate’s “hardy country roots and tried to make that aspect of his past the core of his political persona” (32). In order to create that persona, they made central his log cabin origins and his work as a rail splitter.

Paul Boller, Jr. locates the origin of the rail splitter story in his 1996 book *Presidential Campaigns*. According to Boller, Lincoln’s cousin John Hanks walked into the convention with a set of rails and asked the candidate to identify them as his products of his handiwork. Initially reluctant to do so, Lincoln eventually acquiesced to a crowd imploring him to “Identify your work!” (103) Republican newspapers across the North spread the story and Lincoln’s background as rail splitter became central to the way he was presented in public. The multi-faceted effectiveness of the image seems apparent. Making a living by physical labor authenticated him as a man of the people. As a hearty laborer, Lincoln exhibited a physical strength that might translate to political toughness. Finally, the product of his labors, the American railroad, contributed to the general well-being and success of the nation. Boller

recounts a verse published by the *Baltimore Sun* that imagines an exchange between Lincoln and his election opponent, Stephen Douglas, who had been thought to fracture the Democratic Party:

Quoth Abe to Steve, “I cannot fail,  
I’m bound to fill that station;  
Long—long ago—I split the rail  
To fence this might nation.”  
Quoth Steve, with chuckle hearty,  
“I’ve split old Jackson’s hickory tree,  
The Democratic Party.” (qtd. in Boller 104)

Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis go as far as to credit Lincoln’s image as a self-made man and rail splitter as a primary factor in his ability to lure “voters into grappling with the moral gravity of the slavery question” (237).

The significance of this background as character testimony was not left unquestioned. Cornog quotes a *New York Times* editorial that states, “It is true that in the days of his youth Mr. Lincoln was guilty of splitting rails, but as he did it simply with the intent of obtaining an honest livelihood, it is neither to his disadvantage or otherwise” (33). Yet there may be no greater evidence of the significance of these background images in character testimony than the fact that they have survived as aspects of Lincoln’s reputation for a century and a half.

These anecdotes cover only a few episodes in political storytelling during the first century of the American presidency. Yet they illustrate some aspects of storytelling that have been regularly used in gaining the popular recognition that legitimizes the American presidency. First, the character testimony provided through successful and lasting American presidential narratives reflects the balance between nobility and humility that originated with the institution of the office. Often, this balance has been effectively maintained by character testimony that proves mettle through war experience and demonstrating self-made success through a background in farming or other manual labor. Second, effective character testimony in

presidential lore emphasizes the virility of the hero. Finally, depicting presidential candidates and presidents as heroes or villains results in narrative frameworks useful in legitimizing presidential authority for one candidate and undermining the legitimacy of the other. I believe these characteristics remain fundamental aspects of presidential storytelling, though the contextual factors in 20<sup>th</sup> century (and into the 21<sup>st</sup>), have continued to shape presidential storytelling.

### **1.3 FACTORS SHAPING CONTEMPORARY PRESIDENTIAL STORYTELLING**

I believe that there are three distinctive (yet overlapping) factors that shape contemporary presidential storytelling. These have developed progressively over the past century: rapidly changing communication media, exponential expansions of executive power, and the failure of effective storytelling by the American left in contrast to the superior understanding of the importance of storytelling by the American right. These factors affect what stories are told, who tells them, and who the audience is. In this section, I will introduce each of these factors by locating their origins in the political history of the American presidency and establishing a nomenclature for discussing their effects on contemporary presidential storytelling in the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

### 1.3.1 Rapidly Changing Communication Media

Technological innovation in telecommunications has been central to myriad cultural developments over the past century and a half. Increasing availability of near-instantaneous transmission of words, sounds, and images (both still and moving) followed by the advent of computer processing and data transmission has resulted in a culture of mass communication that is continually evolving. The presidency's reliance on mass media for its storytelling has developed in parallel with changes in the technology, media institutions, and cultural practices of the voting public. In this section, I will identify three primary modes of presidential storytelling through mass media in order to provide an historical context for the contemporary environment. These three modes are: staging the presidency for immediate broadcast and/or widespread reproduction through multi-media communication technology, utilization of the proper press to influence public opinion, and permanent campaigning in the era of 24-hour news. I will identify and explain these modes by presenting historical examples and citing secondary sources on the subjects. In so doing, I will sequence these modes into a chronological order that reflects how, over time, they layer over one another and each remains prominent.

The first wide-scale effects of mass communication technology were evidenced even prior to the contemporary era: in the campaigns and presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Like presidents before him, Roosevelt's story presented ostensible evidence of character testimony to qualify him for the job. Like Jackson and Harrison, Roosevelt's backstory reflected a self-made man. As Michael Kimmel puts it: "The fin de siècle mission to thwart feminism and revitalize boyhood – and by extension, manhood – reached its symbolic apotheosis in Theodore Roosevelt" (132). According to Kimmel, Roosevelt overcame his sickly boyhood and Eastern, urban

background by venturing to the Wild West, where he became renowned in part for his transformation into manliness (132). Roosevelt used that reputation to launch a political career back in the East and after serving for some time as New York City police commissioner, he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1897.

When war came to the United States in 1898, Roosevelt recognized the opportunity to prove his mettle and, presumably, to provide character testimony for his political career, he resigned his post and quickly mustered a group of volunteer soldiers to fight under his command (Cornog 53). He and his “Rough Riders” enjoyed great fame for their military exploits during a short time in Cuba. The war ended after only a few months, and when he returned home from Cuba, Roosevelt parlayed his fame into election as governor of New York. Two years later, he was selected by incumbent President William McKinley to be the Republican nominee for vice-president. Just months after his inauguration, McKinley was assassinated and Theodore Roosevelt became president at 42 years old. Thus, over the span of three years, Roosevelt advanced his political career from assistant secretary of the Navy to President of the United States. His military background, like Washington, Jackson, Harrison, and Grant before him served as character testimony for his election (as vice-president in this case), though, their military careers predated their political careers.

Roosevelt’s performance as president should be no surprise given the manner in which he so overtly crafted his story for popular consumption. As popular historian David McCullough puts it in his introduction to *The Power and the Presidency*:

The twentieth-century presidency begins with Theodore Roosevelt. He was like nobody who had ever been president before and appeared on the scene just as the century was getting underway. Significantly, it was also at the point when it became technically possible to reproduce photographs in newspapers and magazines. So Roosevelt immediately became the most photographed president in history until then—and usually in action, this made possible by improved camera technique. He was photographed with

his family, jumping his horse, hiking, playing tennis. James J. Hill, the railroad tycoon, who didn't care for Roosevelt, said all he ever did was pose for pictures and draw his pay. (Wilson 8)

Roosevelt's deliberate use of new communication methods to tell his own story marked an important transition for presidential storytelling. Through expanding communication technology, Roosevelt could gain recognition by the masses with little investment of time and energy.

Roosevelt crafted an image meant for broad public consumption as president. His progressive agenda, referred to as the "Square Deal," required legitimizing government power to combat vast corporate trusts with tremendous resources. His virility legitimized that authority. His ability to reinforce that character testimony through the proliferation of photographic images allowed him to take his argument to the people repeatedly and not just during the campaign. Roosevelt, after all, was the first to consider the presidency as a "bully pulpit" (Milkis 204). He used his popularity to persuade public opinion. The ability to mass produce his literal image was critical to his ability to persuade.

A few decades later, the presidency of his distant cousin Franklin Roosevelt furthered the degree to which presidential action is designed for immediate broadcast and/or widespread reproduction. From his nominating convention onward, Roosevelt broke with long standing tradition in order to maximize opportunities to procure public recognition. Traditionally, candidates for a party's nomination to the presidency stayed away from the nominating convention and waited for official word of the nomination to reach him. Roosevelt broke this tradition by appearing at the convention itself and speaking to the delegates. There he argued for what he referred to as a "New Deal" for the American people. According to Boller, the term was first introduced there and took hold after it was popularized in a newspaper cartoon following the

convention (233). In his analysis of the event, Boller also points out that the intention of Roosevelt appearing in person at the convention may have been intended to counteract any impression of him as weak due to his inability to walk. By breaking traditions, Roosevelt portrayed himself as a man of action who was not confined by political convention even if he was confined to using a wheelchair.

Roosevelt's campaign shattered the previous traditions related to candidates staying somewhat distant from the campaign. Boller reports that "during the campaign Roosevelt traveled about 13,000 miles by train and gave sixteen major addresses, each devoted to a special topic, and many minor ones" (234). So many speeches required another change in tradition; Roosevelt was the first president to employ and utilize professional speechwriters (Boller 235).

The popularity of radio gave Franklin Roosevelt new opportunities for broad recognition in both campaigning and governing. The introduction of the Roosevelt campaign's famous theme song, "Happy Days Are Here Again," offers an exemplary anecdote about the power of radio. Apparently, after the nominating speech at the convention the band played "Anchors Aweigh" since Roosevelt (like his predecessor cousin) had been Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt aides Louis Howe and Edward Flynn thought it sounded terrible on the radio, so they instructed the band to play something better suited to the radio, and the campaign had its theme song (Boller 236). The moment exemplifies a shift in presidential storytelling. How the event might be perceived by the radio audience was more important than how it was perceived by the live audience, because the former was much broader and much larger.

Prior to this shift, stories testifying to a president's character spread by word of mouth, newspapers, and local supporters. These stories were often reinforced by the use of static images reminding citizens of biographical backstory. With the advent of multi-media mass

communication, especially through radio and film, moving images and sounds associated with presidential events were broadcast and distributed to a national audience. Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats," specifically constructed for radio broadcast, established the convention of regular presidential address to the nation through broadcast media. Because each of these chats represented serial reporting by the president about the actions he was taking, this mode of presidential storytelling reflects a profound intersection between presidential storytelling and the dramatic performance media. In the next chapter, I will look at this phenomenon in greater detail by looking at the relatively recent presidency of Ronald Reagan, whose presidential storytelling reflected a fully matured dramatic narrative performed through the dramatic media. First, however, I will cover two other modes of presidential storytelling that result from rapidly changing communication media.

As president, Franklin Roosevelt maximized use of mass media in governing. The administration's relationship with the press illustrated this characteristic and marks a second mode of presidential storytelling through mass media. Presidents use the press to influence public opinion and "control the story." The foundational book on this subject is Samuel Kernell's *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (1986). Kernell links the growth in the power of the executive branch over the twentieth century to certain presidential administrations' deft manipulation of the media that, to an increasing degree, allows presidential administrations to appeal directly to the people. According to his analysis, the efficacies of mass communication technology have made it possible for the president to use the public as an instrument in the administration's conflict with opposing forces within the political structure. Kernell's idea rests on the expansion of Theodore Roosevelt's "bully pulpit." He argues that what once required reasoned negotiation among a variety of officeholders now consists of the president convincing

the public and then using the power of public opinion to bludgeon his opposition. In other words, shaping prevailing public perspectives on matters of interest to the presidency is not only a possibility of the president's power, but the power of the presidency is contingent on it.

There are four primary ways that a presidential administration can "go public" with his case by using the press. First, presidential administrations can choose what issues or events are newsworthy and "force other negotiators to deal with it" (53). For example, a presidential address on a particular topic immediately brings national attention to that topic and prompts a response from the opposition party. Second, administrations can release information selectively in order to boost the president's bargaining position. For example, on matters of national security, the president may relay information or intelligence that emphasizes his status as commander-in-chief. Third, presidents can stake a position on a topic so that others must take positions only in response. For example, the president can raise a topic and then take a centrist position and force the opposition to either agree or take a position perceived as extreme. Finally, presidents can "float a trial balloon from which he may identify coalition partners and test potential avenues of compromise" (53). For example, the administration can lead the press to cover an issue just to gauge what the public response might be.

In order to maximize the value of the press, presidents have employed divergent strategies in developing relationships with them. Kernell cites Franklin Roosevelt's mutual respect with the members of the press corps as crucial to his administrations' popularity (63). Roosevelt won over members of the press individually and used their favor in order to sell the public on himself, his policies, and his ideological frameworks. In fact, Kernell cites Roosevelt's favorable relationship with the press and his reliance on the press as the primary means for the president's public persuasion (106). Roosevelt delivered 31 fireside chats during his 12 year

presidency (museum.tv). In contrast, Kernell reports that Roosevelt invited correspondents into the oval office 998 times during his presidency (64). Thus, while Roosevelt's direct radio addresses remain a part of presidential legacy, Kernell argues that his use of the press maintained the president's popularity.

Kernell identifies the Kennedy administration's use of the press corps as a "prop" in an event staged for television and labels this the Kennedy System (76). In the Kennedy System, the administration allows the press to be seen as hard-probing reporters while, in actuality, the format of the television press conference allows for a more careful selection of question and answers than appears so on television. Kernell argues that the presidents since use a similar methodology in crafting messages for public consumption.

These administrations, and the ones that have followed, have used these and similar methods to *control the story*. Even in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the press (especially television) introduces the public to what issues and events are important. The press establishes the status quo by providing the backstory, identifies the important plot points by periodically updating the stories, and determines the end point by dropping their coverage. Therefore, the administration's capacity to control the story depends a great deal on the extent to which the administration can manipulate the mass media press.

Finally, I turn to permanent campaigning in the era of 24-hour news as the third mode of presidential storytelling through mass media. In his 2008 book, *The Presidency in the Era of 24-Hour News*, media/political scholar Jeffrey Cohen offers a trenchant political and cultural analysis of the ways in which the power of the presidency continues to change in a new media environment. Cohen effectively argues that the fragmented nature of new media coverage has lessened recent presidents' capacity to "go public" through manipulation of the press. He

describes the multi-faceted and enormous effects of 24-hour news programs, news with obvious political slants, and the blending of news with entertainment programming. Cohen concludes that 24-hour coverage and the multitude of kinds of news programs and venues results in sets of media that criticize the presidency much more readily than the previous media controlled by the proper press. Therefore, the contemporary presidency responds by attempting to communicate with divergent interest groups at different times and through different means.

Surely administrations always had to control multiple stories. The contemporary distinction is that the story is now told many times, in many different ways, to many different groups of people. During most of the Cold War, the evening news aired on all three national television networks at one time. Therefore, if all three networks covered an issue, the vast majority of the citizens being informed by television would be made aware of that issue. Similarly, when the president wanted to speak to the nation, all three television networks gave him time and most households were unable to turn the channel away from that speech. By the time Bill Clinton took office, the idea of “three networks” had long passed, and cable television, the FOX network, video playback machines, and video games populated the American household. Instead of a specific sequence of news items contributing to a contained narrative, an overabundance of perspectives, events, images, and personalities flood the minds of citizens who might construct divergent narratives consisting of backstory and plot points from various sources.

Awareness of this phenomenon has led presidential administrations to engage in what is widely called the “permanent campaign.” The term traces its origins to Sidney Blumenthal’s 1982 book of the same name, but it now usually refers to the way presidential administrations focus their communications strategies on securing public approval, not only for support of the

political agenda, but also for generic approval of the president (Pika 136). As Pika and Maltese report:

Presidents make these appeals through the means we have discussed in this chapter: public speeches, public appearances, and political travel, coupled with targeted outreach using White House staff units such as the Office of Communications and the Office of Public Liaison. (137)

This mode of presidential storytelling has become all the more central with an increasing amount of digital media including hundreds of cable television channels, satellite radio networks, digital video available on the internet, and social networking websites. Barack Obama delivers video addresses designed for the popular video sharing website, youtube.com.

In order to communicate coherent stories, presidential administrations cannot rely on the previous modes of storytelling through mass media. Because citizens have access to an essentially endless amount of representations of presidential performance, news events, and political issues, administrations cannot control the sequence of events in order to “control the story.” Instead, they must craft events and representations that can be viewed in various contexts and sequences. Again in chapter 2, I will explore how Reagan’s performance of the presidency recognized this factor and exploited it.

### **1.3.2 The Expanding Authority of the Executive Branch**

Scholars from divergent political ideologies and academic disciplines generally agree that the power of the executive branch of American government has expanded greatly in the last century. Not surprisingly, these thinkers do not always agree about the historical origins of the expansion, the driving reasons behind it, or its value in American democracy. In this section, I consider two

competing perspectives on this development. Each of these offers insight into how it factors into contemporary presidential storytelling.

In her 2008 book *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People*, Dana Nelson argues that the recent theory of presidential power articulated by the George W. Bush administration as the “unitary executive” serves to consolidate federal power under the control of the president to the detriment of American democracy. According to historian Sean Wilentz, the term “unitary executive” was first used in public by members of the Bush administration but first discussed as an operating principle during the Reagan administration and was anticipated by the Nixon administration (441). Nelson roots the theory in presidential actions that date back at least as far as Franklin Roosevelt. She defines the unitary executive as:

This theory of leadership for government and democracy explicitly challenges the balancing and mixing of powers that the framers believed would ensure a healthy check on each branch and its proponents reject prior notions that the president’s leadership depends on his abilities to negotiate and compromise. Insisting that the president should control *all* administrative power, with an unchecked right to determine how laws are implemented, the unitary executive maneuvers with preemption and unilateralism. (3)

In order to make a case against this theory of presidential authority, Nelson traces the mechanisms by which presidents have successfully legitimized expanding authority. First, she recognizes the deep-rooted power of storytelling in legitimizing presidents and devotes a chapter of her work to linking the mythology of the presidency to the American “superhero.” Nelson then offers her perspective on the role of the media in consolidation of executive power, followed by the manner by which presidents have used war powers to acquire additional authority that the executive branch does not cede in peace. Finally, Nelson explains expanding executive authority by linking right-wing economic ideology and political order modeled on corporate organizational structures and aligned with corporate interests.

Nelson's begins her work by describing historical narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries similar to those that I discussed in the second section of this chapter. However, she highlights a particular connection between the advent of the popular "superhero" narrative found in comics, radio fiction, film and eventually television and the expanding expectations and authority of the presidency. In great part, Nelson's argument rests on her application of philosophers Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's idea of the American monomyth. The monomyth tells the following story:

A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by an evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero recedes into obscurity. (qtd. in Nelson 48)

As Nelson points out, countless popular American fantasies over the last century follow this basic story model, such as *Star Wars*, *Superman*, and *Spiderman*. According to Nelson, these stories serve as a model by which presidential administrations can legitimize increasing authority from the citizen-audience. In order to take advantage of this cultural property, presidents emphasize contextual events as "crises" that require extraordinary actions on the part of the president (playing the role of the superhero). These extraordinary actions might have been previously considered unconstitutional or otherwise illegitimate, but the inciting threats have legitimized them. She refers to such behavior as "crisis presidentialism," and it is not difficult to find numerous historical examples that fit that general model (119). Nelson cites Franklin Roosevelt's "crisis-based" internment of Japanese prisoners during World War II and Truman's ballooning of federal defense expenditures in response to the "crisis" of the Cold War (120).<sup>3</sup> From the 9/11 attacks that were used to justify the "crisis-based" electronic surveillance of

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<sup>3</sup> Others might surely provide examples as far back as John Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts during the crisis with France and Lincoln's suspension of *habeus corpus* in Maryland at the start of the Civil War.

citizens, to even more recent corporate bailouts based on the ongoing economic “crisis,” the executive branch regularly finds the context of crisis useful in legitimizing expanding authority.

These crises also provide opportunities to ratings-seeking news organizations; they reinforce the reality of the crisis in order to draw larger audiences. Nelson echoes Kernell’s analysis in explaining that the president uses the press to make the news and uses public response to that news as justification for particular actions. Put another way, the crisis is good backdrop for stories initiated by the president and told through the press.

Finally, Nelson illuminates the degree to which corporate interests have both structured the contemporary executive branch and have controlled its recent actions. She recounts Franklin Roosevelt’s initiative, popularly called the “Brownlow Committee,” that sought to consolidate federal administrative authorities under the executive branch by modeling the organizational structure of that era’s corporate executive officers (50). While most of the committee’s recommendations failed to be approved by Congress, the ideas themselves would remain and be instituted during subsequent presidential administrations. For example, Richard Nixon created the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 1971, which consolidated budget preparation for all executive branch agencies and required all federal regulations to be cleared through the office, even for those independent agencies otherwise not under the direct authority of the president (150). From Nelson’s perspective, the administration of George W. Bush took these ideas to extremes. She writes:

Earlier debates about the theory (of the unitary executive) relied on at least apparently democracy-friendly theory of branch equality – each branch has its separate and “equal” powers; the president has an “equal” right to interpret the Constitution with the other two branches. Thus Unitarians could claim that they were simply working to make inter-branch relations more fairly competitive. But these claims to democratic “equality” for the president’s power could hardly restrain the unitary executive theory’s realpolitik aim for supremacy. The “hierarchy” that Reagan Unitarians touted for organizing the

executive branch would, in the new Bush-Cheney vision, extend beyond the executive branch to the entire federal government, and indeed, the world. (173-174)

Obviously, Nelson's analysis of the expanding authority of the executive branch is heavily influenced by her ideological opposition to the administration about which she is writing.

Historian Eli Zaretsky, who probably shares some of Nelson's political leanings, approached the expanding authority of the executive branch very differently in the context of the Clinton administration. Zaretsky trumpets the expanding power of the presidency as a "vehicle for democratic strivings" (11). In his 2001 essay "The Culture Wars of the 1960s and the Assault on the Presidency: The Meaning of the Clinton Impeachment," Zaretsky argues that the seemingly endless investigations of Bill Clinton by the Republican-led Congress in the 1990s resulted from an ideological battle over presidential authority as expanded beginning with the New Deal. Zaretsky claims that Franklin Roosevelt's presidency freed the presidency from party control, broadened civic entitlement, and promoted a pluralist and secular society (14).

In this version of the expanding presidency, subsequent expansions of presidential authority followed the template set by Roosevelt. Zaretsky views Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" of the 1960s as attempts to fulfill New Deal promises with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the universal entitlements of Medicare and Medicaid (14). He considers Clinton initiatives such as universal health care and family and medical leave rules as the largest social program proposals since the 1960s (19). Zaretsky claims that the partisan political landscape of the 1990s that climaxed in the impeachment of Bill Clinton marked yet another battle in a long struggle between a presidency that champions the underprivileged and the conservative political elite, who want to undermine that power. According to this narrative, reactionary political forces stoke resentment about the civil rights movement and feminism and foster the perception that the

government imposed those cultural movements on the people through a presidency with too much power (17).

The expanding power of the executive, viewed from these and other perspectives, necessarily shapes presidential storytelling, since growing authority requires expanded legitimization. And, as Nelson and many others have pointed out, contemporary presidents who do not live up to their super-hero analogues cannot legitimize their authority effectively. Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush are the last two incumbent presidents to lose re-election. Nelson claims that Americans rejected Carter's "resolute refusal to play the part of the hero" in favor of Reagan's "reality-defying optimism" in 1980 (59). Similarly, Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis bemoan George H.W. Bush's perceived deficiencies because the press across the political spectrum agreed that he did not possess the "vision thing," an attribute the political scientists consign to "mystics, anchorites, and imbibers of psychedelics" (234).

Thus, the contemporary presidency's expanding authority requires corresponding presidential storytelling. As the authority expands, its legitimacy is supported by mythologies and narratives that testify to personal character and locate presidential action in the context of crisis. While such narratives appeared sporadically in the past, they have become essential to an administration's ability to win public support and maintain political power.

### **1.3.3 Deficient Storytelling by American Progressives**

I began this chapter by exploring the inherent links between narrative storytelling and political power through the lens of human evolution and cognitive science. I return to those ideas in presenting the third factor that shapes the contemporary American presidency. Since the 2000

presidential election, American political progressives have tried to identify and explain a confounding property of contemporary American politics. American voters generally agree with progressives on issues, but often vote for conservatives or reactionaries in national elections. I believe that this phenomenon can best be explained by a fundamental deficiency in effective storytelling by the American political progressives. Moreover, I contend that this deficiency profoundly shapes contemporary presidential storytelling.

In his 2008 book *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics*, cognitive scientist George Lakoff demonstrates that American progressives fail to make a case for their candidates and their politics because they do not appeal effectively to the minds of American voters. Lakoff argues that contemporary findings of cognitive science demonstrate that human ideas regarding morality and politics are embodied in “the peculiarities of human anatomy in general and on the way we, as human beings, function on our planet and with each other” (10). According to Lakoff, progressives generally attempt political persuasion only at the level of the conscious thought and traditional reasoning, a three-century old Enlightenment approach to political discourse that ignores the scientific reality that most political persuasion occurs at the subconscious level. As Lakoff writes to the would-be persuader who takes this approach: “You think that all you need to do is give people the facts and the figures and they will reach the right conclusion” (11). Instead, Lakoff argues that humans generally place facts and figures into linguistic and narrative frameworks that are “determined by how we function with our bodies in both the physical and social worlds” (11). In other words, our minds are usually made up long before we get the facts and figures, and we use selective facts to reinforce what’s already been determined.

As opposed to American progressives, Lakoff explains that conservatives appeal to the whole of voters' political minds, but especially the subconscious and emotional parts of the mind that construct the frameworks for understanding. According to Lakoff's logic, when progressives present facts and figures they are either absorbed into the conservative frameworks, or they are ignored. For example, conservative political institutions have, for decades, tapped into reactionary resentment over the civil rights movement and feminism by fostering the sense that government (controlled by liberals) imposed these cultural changes on the people: a phenomenon I addressed in the previous section.

In terms of Fukuyama's building blocks, this conservative narrative successfully appeals to kin selection. A successful progressive alternative might appeal to reciprocal altruism (presumably the root appeal of the Civil Rights Movement itself). Yet, mainstream political progressives offer no successful competing narrative. The controversy over Barack Obama's birthplace exemplifies this dynamic. Obviously, the fiction that Obama was born in a foreign country seeks to undermine the legitimacy of his authority. Like most political applications of racism and xenophobia, the story appeals to our natural inclination for kin selection. While most so-called "birthers" deny their racism, the source of the irrational belief's appeal is evident if one understands that the inclination towards kin selection is a fundamental building block of political power. The long-standing refusal to accept the preponderance of evidence contrary to the appealing narrative fits with Lakoff's description of effective storytelling: "when you accept a particular narrative, you ignore or hide realities that contradict it" (37). According to the reactionary political frame, Obama is an illegitimate foreigner who charmed the electorate and the media into believing he was an American and could be elected president. Therefore, any member of the media that reports there is no evidence that Obama was born in another country

has simply been brainwashed into saying such things. What seems unfathomably delusional to progressives simply illustrates a fundamental property of successful political framing.

In *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (2007), Drew Westen describes a good example of how conservative political framing succeeds even when progressives try to oppose it. He describes how the brief biographic video presented at the 2004 Democratic National Convention undermined its intended narrative by fitting into a pre-existing conservative frame. The story the campaign tried to tell about its candidate was that John Kerry was born to privilege and could have avoided military service and spent his career in pursuit of greater material wealth. Instead, Kerry felt the need to give back to the country and serve the public in the military and in political office. It seems likely that the campaign understood the long history of military service as an important testimony to character in presidential politics and thought it all the more important in the first presidential election following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Yet, in trying to tell that story, the campaign inadvertently reinforced the Bush campaign team's strategic narrative of Kerry: that he was over-privileged and out-of-touch with the struggles of the common person (7). The convention video undermined its intended narrative by neglecting to realize the full implications of the words and images included in their video narrative. Earlier in this chapter, I referred to this effect as narrative backfire. In the first 19<sup>th</sup> century case, an attack on William Henry Harrison backfired by inadvertently associating the candidate with the common man. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century example, an intended positive narrative backfired by fitting into a preexisting and more powerful narrative casting the candidate as an out-of-touch elitist.

Another recent example of the failure of political progressives comes from the popular acceptance of presidential "triangulation," a term that described the political maneuvering of Bill

Clinton and has recently been embraced by the administration of Barack Obama. As Sean Wilentz explains it, triangulation describes the president placing himself politically between Democratic liberals and Republican conservatives on an issue-by-issue basis (350). This sort of political maneuver may result in short-term political success but it serves as evidence in a particularly effective conservative narrative: the progressive president has no moral values or strong personal convictions. (I will address this narrative strategy again in the third chapter.)

Contemporary thinkers like Lakoff, Westen, Fukuyama, and Boyd among many others recognize the connections between storytelling and the political order. Some of these have pointed out a fundamental storytelling deficiency exhibited by mainstream American progressives. I believe that this deficiency helps shape the contemporary American presidency. Like Lakoff and Westen, I also believe that this deficiency contributes to an imbalance in American politics that threatens to tilt American government toward a reactionary ideology. Lakoff claims that failure to correct the imbalance might result in the realization of the reactionary endgame: “unaccountable (corporate) government without a moral mission” (63). My study will not attempt to validate that concern. However, I do premise my work on the possibility that the deficiency is actual, and the potential that finding successful avenues for contrasting narrative strategies may contribute to the defense against the triumph of the reactionary.

## 2.0 CONTEMPORARY PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE

Presidential stories can be told through a variety of means. The president himself is not necessary for some of these. For example, journalists write articles and television reporters construct “pieces” about presidents and candidates. During presidential campaigns, volunteers distribute literature or make telephone calls on behalf of particular candidates. Presidential administrations employ surrogates that appear on television news programs. Presidential appointees attend government functions instead of the president. Additionally, the large majority of the vast business of the executive branch is conducted without the direct involvement of the person who holds the chief executive office. The campaigns and administrations use these means and many more to tell or reinforce narratives central to communication strategies. However, the personal stature of the political office-holder – the President of the United States – provides the most visible, robust, and effective means of presidential storytelling. In contemporary society, communication technology continuously broadcasts the actions of the president to millions of citizens. Therefore, in recent decades, the successful performance of the presidency, transmitted across electronic media, is the central means of successful presidential storytelling.

In the context of this dissertation, I use “performance of the presidency” or “presidential performance” in reference to the actions and words of the president himself in service to the strategic narratives of the kind described in the first chapter. Not all of these actions and words, however, serve each of the stories in the same way. For example, an interview with the president that appears on “60 Minutes” may serve a different purpose from a

staged photo opportunity with a foreign leader that occurs the next day. These performance events may be intended for different audiences, communicate different aspects of one story, or nurture different narratives altogether.

As I explained throughout the first chapter, American presidential administrations have long used elements of successful storytelling to shape and support narratives that legitimize their authority, maintain support of the voting (viewing) public, and set their actions within particular moral and ideological frameworks. Here, I propose that contemporary presidents, especially those since Ronald Reagan, communicate and support those narratives primarily through particular kinds of performances that are transmitted by electronic media. In this chapter, I explore the political precedents of contemporary presidential performance set by Reagan, identify useful cognitive links between performance and storytelling, and establish three elementary categories of performance that serve as contemporary presidential storytelling.

In the first section, I discuss how the presidency of Ronald Reagan set precedents for contemporary presidential storytelling through performance. Tim Raphael's recent book, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (2010), provides a foundation by demonstrating how Reagan's background in various performance media prepared him to perform in the contemporary mode. In the second section, I utilize ideas borrowed from Bruce McConachie and Brian Boyd to describe the relationships among play, performance, and ritual in order to articulate my understanding of the ways storytelling is performed through the contemporary presidency. In three subsections, I establish categories for describing particular kinds of presidential performance pertinent to this study, describe each of these, and briefly examine particular post-Reagan cases as examples to set the stage for George W. Bush's performances in the remaining chapters.

## 2.1 THE PRECEDENTIAL PERFORMANCE OF RONALD REAGAN

In his *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (1996), Marvin Carlson recognizes the contested nature of the idea of performance and notes that the word might be used to describe a variety of human activities. These include: the display of particular sets of skills; the display of culturally coded patterns of behavior that are consciously executed for the benefit of others; the playing of roles either in the conventional theatrical sense or a broader cultural sense, or the general effectiveness of an attempt to achieve success (4). In attempting to locate a definition that encompasses all three, Carlson concludes that:

...performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self...central to this phenomenon is the sense of an action carried out *for* someone, an action involved in the peculiar doubling that comes with consciousness and with the elusive other that performance is not but which it constantly struggles in vain to embody. (5)

Carlson's introductory explanation applies to the presidency as performed *for* those governed, the standards of history (often articulated through the concept of *posterity*), and, I argue here, to communicate and reinforce strategic narratives intended to legitimize their authority, to maintain support of the voting (viewing) public, and to set their actions within particular moral and ideological frameworks.

As I addressed in the first chapter, staging the presidency for immediate broadcast and/or widespread reproduction through multi-media communication technology has been a significant factor in presidential storytelling since Theodore Roosevelt. Between Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, however, such staging developed from an effective tool (under Roosevelt) to a central pillar of governance (under Reagan). Over the course of the twentieth century, presidential storytelling progressively moved from being primarily an exercise in linguistic

narrative supplemented by the distribution of electronic performance to narrative strategies primarily realized through the transmission of mimetic performance over dramatic media. As I will explain throughout this chapter, the primacy of performance as the mode of presidential storytelling makes new demands of, and provides new opportunities for, presidents and presidential candidates.

As Merlin Donald has pointed out, storytelling through performance is markedly different from storytelling through linguistic narrative. As he articulates:

The mimetic mode is essentially theatrical and cinematic. It contrasts with the linear, digital, nature of speech and narrative storytelling. In the latter, episodes are never directly reenacted (except perhaps as a supplement to the story). Linguistic representations are not restricted by the rules of perceptual resemblance and thus escape the limitations of episodic representations. At the same time, they lose some of their evocative power. Linguistic representations break episodes into labeled components and recombine them into sentences that allow the speaker a virtual infinity of options in representing the same episode. (284)

Prior to performance's supremacy in presidential storytelling, presidents largely relied on the symbolic storytelling of language and second-hand report for transmission of their stories. For example, stories about presidential candidates might be spread from newspaper reporter to voter or from voter to voter. The validity of these narratives may have been tested by the plausibility of the stories and the credibility of the reporter. Before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mimetic non-symbolic performances of the candidate himself were constantly broadcast into the homes of potential voters. These performances offered the primary means for public reception and validation of particular narratives.

To provide a straightforward illustration of the different demands of the mimetic and non-mimetic modes, we might consider the divergent effectiveness of two presidential campaign narratives: one that does not rely on mimesis and one that does. In 1840, William Henry Harrison was elected president just months before he died. As discussed in the first chapter of

this dissertation, his election was supported by the character testimony provided by stories of his prior military successes. Like other military hero narratives, these stories testified to Harrison's virility and vitality. Had he attempted to perform the aspects of those narratives for all potential voters to see (for example on television), his apparent poor health might have undermined the validity of his virility and vitality, and what I have previously termed *narrative backfire* might have ensued. Harrison's hero narrative relied on the linguistic evocation of virility and vitality; had these qualities been tested by his performances, they might have been rejected. For a contemporary example of that happening, we might consider Michael Dukakis' infamous ride in a military tank in 1988. Running for president against sitting Vice President George H.W. Bush in 1988, Dukakis had been criticized for his distanced, dispassionate candidacy. Probably in an effort to supply testimony to his virility and vitality, the Dukakis campaign chose to have the candidate ride in a tank for media broadcast. The scene did not play well. Dukakis appeared to be (in some combination) out of place, silly or phony. A prime example of narrative backfire, I point to this event to illustrate the evocative power of mimetic performance. Dukakis' unconvincing performance in the tank was not only unsuccessful in serving as positive character testimony. The scene reinforced opposing characterizations of Dukakis as weak, dispassionate, and insincere much more effectively than had his opponents merely verbally labeled him as such.

That presidential campaign would determine who would replace Ronald Reagan as president. In this section, I argue that Ronald Reagan's presidency provided a model for contemporary presidential storytelling through performance media. I submit that Reagan's success in office and lasting influence can be credited to his ability to perform the role of president. Through his performances, I argue that Reagan successfully: nurtured a presidential brand; controlled the story by assuming the blended role of narrator and protagonist; established

a predominant narrative about the role of government in society; and set the expectations that presidential action would resemble drama.

In his 1991 chronicle of Ronald Reagan's presidency, aptly titled *President Reagan: the Role of a Lifetime*, biographer Lou Cannon recounts an interview the president gave to ABC's David Brinkley shortly before Reagan left office. Asked if his background as an actor had been of use during his presidency, Reagan responded, "There have been times in this office when I've wondered how you could do the job if you hadn't been an actor" (51). Cannon's biography, like many other political and historical analyses, attributes Reagan's popularity and triumphs to his successful performances. In recounting a representative moment, he provides a tangible example of how important performance was to Reagan as president:

Over time the cinematic approach became so woven into the fabric of the Reagan presidency that subordinates schooled in economics or statecraft routinely used Hollywood terminology to direct Reagan in his daily tasks. It could be an unsettling practice to those unaccustomed to it. One White House aide recalls that Secretary of State George P. Shultz, huddling with Reagan in the secure vault of the American ambassador's residence in Moscow during the 1988 summit, coached him for his meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by telling him what to do 'in this scene.' Shultz proceeded through a series of precise directions in stage terminology, telling Reagan where to stand and what to say. The aide was horrified that the secretary of state would treat the president as a man who 'didn't have the intellectual wherewithal to be able to think on his own.' But Reagan was not offended. He himself saw the meeting with Gorbachev as a significant performance, and he valued the services of a good director. (54)

The aide's concern over the event reveals a common (and historically long-standing) conflation of performance and artifice. Yet Reagan's conduct of the office rejects the notion that performative aspects of his presidency were merely illusions concealing his "real" presidency. Reagan's successful performances legitimized his presidency, garnered popular support for his policies, and ensured his ideological and popular legacy.

In *The Electric President: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (2010), Timothy Raphael details how Reagan's performance background prepared him to conduct presidential communication in the context of a society newly saturated with mediatized performances. In the introduction to his book, he notes that "the performance elements of Reagan's presidency are still generally perceived to be an epiphenomenon – the smoke and mirrors of stagecraft generated to sell the meat and potatoes of statecraft" (7-8). Taken as a whole, his work rejects these perceptions and effectively demonstrates that the performance elements of Reagan's presidency provided the man, the administration, and his ideological legacy crucial support within the American political system.

Raphael's analysis of Reagan's performance rests on foundational assertions he makes about the cultural and political context of Reagan's presidency. In addition to supporting his analysis of Reagan's performance as president, his explanations reinforce assumptions underlying my entire study: that effective contemporary presidential administrations rely on mimetic storytelling to legitimize their authority and garner popular support for the administration and its policies.

Raphael uses Raymond Williams' understanding of "The Dramatized Society" to support his contention that contemporary culture is permeated with dramatizations, representations, and simulations of reality to an extent unrealized in prior eras. In his view, television and other electronic media offer a 'window to the world' that has become a primary frame of reference for popular understanding of reality. As Raphael explains it, citizens of the dramatized society perceive the world through a series of mediatized sounds and images and therefore are conditioned to make their own stories through broad sets of sounds and images (6). He further explains:

The scope and scale of electronic media, the extent to which they suffuse our everyday lives, endow these performances with the capacity to alter human behavior; the way we move and speak, dress and eat, work and play. These media provide the repertoire of resources – scripts and scenarios, tools and techniques – that we draw on to enact our daily life or to imagine how it might be different. (11)

Not surprisingly, the dynamics of the dramatized society have significant impacts on the political order. The same dramatic media that serve as resources for social behavior also serve as the models for popular understanding of leaders, heroes, and just governance.

Raphael emphasizes the political consequences of the dramatized society by connecting it to Frederic Jameson's insight that culture has become the object of consumer society (12). According to the logic of the argument, cultural objects like theatre, literature, and art were previously uncommon enough to be separate from other aspects of economic and political life. For example, prior to the dramatized society, domestic stage comedies might have been seen by some portion of the population, but with a relative infrequency and certainly not every day. In the dramatized society, technology like television transmits cultural products like crime dramas and news magazines to American homes on a daily basis. As central activities of leisure and commerce, the dominance of these products overwhelms and intertwines with aspects of society that might previously been somewhat distinct from them. Because drama and other cultural products have become so important in how members of society see reality, culture has become the dominant component of society, overwhelming discrete economic or political perspectives. Individuals who watch television comedies, for example, not only learn to process their narratives through a mimetic mode, but they also look to these programs to model behavior, define tastes, and place their experiences in a social context. Intra-family dynamics are reinforced or undermined by viewing dramatic events. The promotion of particular aesthetics is built into the financial model of television through product placement. Differences in economic

class may be popularly understood through comparison with the family that appears on television instead of with the family on the other side of town.

In a political system that relies on votes and financial contributions, citizens' political interests, too, are shaped and reflected through cultural products like television dramas.

According to this understanding, voters are unlikely to understand political candidates through economic or political ideas. Rather they view them through cultural identification. As Raphael explains it:

Our engagement with politics is now thoroughly mediated by culture. And if culture can no longer be construed as a superstructural feature of capitalism but rather its animating logic then anyone seeking to understand American politics today must pay close attention to the cultural predicates of political practice and power. (12)

He points to Ronald Reagan's successes as president as the clearest illustration of culture's dominance in American political discourse.<sup>4</sup>

One of Raphael's most useful explanations regarding Reagan's success is his observation of the administration's remarkable success in *branding*. Raphael argues that Reagan's ability to achieve broad popular support for his policies and actions derived from the administration's

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, Reagan was elected after these dynamics had already begun to have significant impact on American politics, and the effect of cultural issues and perspectives on American politics has been a point of interest for political scientists and other cultural critics for decades. The 1968 election of Richard Nixon to the presidency has long been recognized as both the beginning of the end of New Deal political alliances and a clear demonstration of the new power of cultural issues in electoral politics. From the Great Depression through most of the Cold War, the Democratic Party dominated national politics. Nixon's election brought cultural issues like race, sex, and religion into mainstream political discourse and drew lines between "progressives" and "conservatives" that continue through the present. For example, historian Eli Zaretsky identifies blatant appeals to racism and an invigorated evangelical religious moralism in the late 1960s as root causes for the breakdown of the old New Deal political alliances (17). The shifting alliances are exemplified by the common progressive complaint that many poor Americans who vote for conservatives based on cultural issues do so against their own economic interests. If that is true, it should not be surprising since the shift from economic mediation of politics to cultural mediation of politics coincided with the shift of national electoral success from the Democratic to the Republican Party.

Both of these shifts, of course, echo the third factor I cited in discussing contemporary presidential storytelling in the first chapter of this dissertation. Conservatives understand the cultural predicates of political practice and power more fully than do their progressive counterparts. Their focus on divisive cultural issues certainly contributes to the relative success of their political narratives. This dynamic may have been first effective in presidential electoral politics in 1968, but I argue that it was fully realized in the electoral success and popularity of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

aggressive pursuit of popular loyalty to “Ronald Reagan” as a “fully dramatized brand image” (156). Raphael cites Reagan’s popularity despite the contrast between his and the public’s views on particular issues as a clear example of the success of the Reagan brand. People might not like his policies, but they liked him and that mattered more. In fact, Raphael argues the perceived discrepancy between the popularity of Reagan as a person and Reagan as a policy maker magnified his personal popularity. According to the argument, people liked him more *because* they liked him despite sometimes disagreeing with him. While Nixon had infamously claimed that illegal actions were legal whenever the president took them, over time Reagan seemed to prove that unpopular actions became popular when President Reagan took them. In order to create and maintain his successful brand, Reagan relied on his mastery of performance through electronic media. The likable Reagan infiltrated American homes by television, radio, magazines, and recorded videos. As Raphael explains:

By the time he became president, there were only a handful of people whose image had circulated for as long or as widely through the communications media, and the Reagan brand was an unparalleled political asset. In the new branded marketplace of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was the *überbrand*. (155)

In the dramatized society, Reagan’s political achievement was rooted in his professional competence in performing through the expanding media fully central to American political discourse. Reagan had professional experience in not only executing appealing performances on radio, television, and film, but he also had successful experience in representing General Electric (GE) as its long-term celebrity spokesman. Reagan’s practical expertise in such performances allowed the administration to rely on the efficiency and effectiveness of performance through media. Reagan not only knew where to stand, what pace at which to speak, and when to look at which camera, he also knew how to sell his audience a product: in this case, himself.

Recognizing the power of Reagan's skills, the administration utilized that branding to exercise the power of its narratives. As Raphael describes it:

Reagan's administration crafted its political authority by scripting and producing electronically disseminated narratives and images featuring the talents of its leading actor, employing mimetic techne and cultural media as the practice of politics by other means. (22)

By primarily relying on the mimetic performances of the president (transmitted across the country) to create a successful brand, the Reagan administration maximized the efficiencies and effectiveness of non-symbolic storytelling.

Reagan's professional background in dramatic and commercial performance provided him with the ability to embody personal characteristics perceived differently by different viewers and in the service of different narratives. For instance, the quality of Reagan's voice over the radio might have resembled a caring, yet stern, grandfather. This character might be ruthlessly strong when describing the Soviet enemy but unguardedly empathetic to Americans mourning the explosion of the Space shuttle *Challenger*. In linguistic storytelling, the character qualities that appear contradictory, like ruthless strength and unguarded empathy, may require lengthy or sophisticated explanations. In Reagan's performances, the combined qualities of character were recognized and validated, so no explanation through additional words was necessary.

In addition to effective branding, the Reagan administration was particularly successful in using presidential performance to define common terms and forms of reference in national political discourse. This is part of presidential storytelling I referred to in chapter 1 as *controlling the story*. As Raphael describes it, Reagan's success in achieving this goal was rooted in choreographed actions by his administration. He writes about a daily event in the Reagan White House:

At 8:15 most mornings during Reagan's first term, White House Chief of Staff James Baker would convene the 'line of the day' meeting. At the meeting...the discussion revolved around how to 'enhance the image of the President,' as one participant phrased it. The primary question addressed in these meetings was 'what do we want the press to cover today and how?' (157-158)

The Reagan administration's version of controlling the story made sure that the media would cover stories using the words and the reference points used by Reagan in his many appearances. In doing so, the administration accomplished two important goals. First, it ensured that any policy debate through the media would use a lexicon authorized by the White House. Second, it successfully cast Reagan as the mediator of national crisis and destiny (157).

Assuming the role of narrator, Reagan defined the beginning, middle, and end of particular national events. He also identified the protagonists (often himself) and the antagonists, the setting, and the expected resolution. For example, many in the media adopted his terminology in describing the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." And even if they did not fully adopt the term, they constantly repeated it. Such characterization allowed Reagan to claim greater credit for both vanquishing the enemy when the Iron Curtain fell and for exhibiting the wisdom of diplomacy in negotiating arms reduction treaties with them. Of course, many dissenters recognized and rejected the narrative strategies employed through these performances. Yet Reagan's popular legacy retains these narrative elements, however disregarded they may be by the large minority that distrust them.

The clearest example of Reagan's lasting importance in presidential storytelling relates to the resilience of Reagan's grand narrative about the proper role of government in American society. This narrative undermined and upended the political narratives fashioned by Franklin Roosevelt in support of the New Deal in the 1930s. In order to maintain support for his administration's significant expansion of the federal government, Roosevelt fostered the

expectation that the executive branch of government would protect the pursuit of happiness by protecting individuals from the risks of unfettered capitalism. This idea facilitated popular support for the regulation of business and the provision of material needs for the nation's elderly and poor. The lasting influence of Roosevelt's ideology had remained well-accepted by the vast majority when Reagan was elected. As conservative pundit George Will quipped at the start of the Reagan administration, "Americans are conservative, what they want to conserve is the New Deal" (qtd. in Cannon 21). Yet Reagan's conservative political ideology rejected these ideas, so the administration sought to replace them with alternative narratives.<sup>5</sup>

As Raphael explains, Reagan's performances allowed the president to replace Roosevelt's grand political narrative with a new narrative that would, like Roosevelt's, survive for decades following his presidency. In Reagan's narrative, government is an antagonist to individual Americans who seek the American dreams of prosperity and happiness. Left alone, these Americans would prosper and create wealth for themselves and the whole community. Reagan supplanted the narratives that supported the New Deal (and its ideological successor, LBJ's "Great Society") with what Reagan called the "Creative Society," where the people would create wealth instead of the government (Raphael 103).

Raphael argues that Reagan's own popularity served to illustrate the power of this grand narrative. The president's performances promoting new films, plugging sporting events, or attending celebrity galas (as president) modeled the actions that would lead to national success. Wealth would generate wealth. As he puts it:

The performance of the Reagan melodrama spurned the New Deal verities of market discipline and government regulation of business. In their stead, Reaganism promulgated a "free market" revolution dedicated to the proposition that in politics, as in other

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<sup>5</sup> I should note that Will's assertion proved valid in the continued popularity and preservation of the Social Security program, despite the fading power of the political narrative that underpins it.

commodity-based markets, consumers' purchasing decisions would no longer be limited by the efficacy of the product (Reagan's policies) but stimulated by a desire for the brand (Reagan's image). (159-160)

Reagan's performances promoted a particular cultural brand instead of a policy brand. These performances told the story of an America, aesthetic in nature, where any adversity could be resolved by capitalist consumption rooted in aesthetic tastes (159). The more popular Reagan became the more his success validated the veracity of his own narrative.

In the introduction to his *Age of Reagan: 1974-2008* (2008), historian Sean Wilentz describes Reagan's historical significance:

The title [*of Wilentz's book*] points to the straightforward proposition that Ronald Reagan has been the single most important political figure of the age. Without Reagan, the conservative movement would never have been as successful as it was. In his political persona, as well as his policies, Reagan embodied a new fusion of deeply conservative politics with some of the rhetoric and even a bit of the spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier. That is not to say that Reagan alone caused the long wave of conservative domination—far from it. But in American political history there have been a few leading figures, most of them presidents, who for better or worse have put their political stamp indelibly on their time. They include Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt – and Ronald Reagan. (2-3)

Another way of thinking about Wilentz' "indelible political stamp" is that certain political figures construct political narratives successful enough to survive their own political careers. I believe that the decades-long triumph of conservative ideology exemplifies the long-term impact of Reagan's central narrative about America. Furthermore, I argue that its success was enabled in great part by his successful performances before the American masses.

These successful performances not only changed American political dynamics and exemplified the shift from an economic mediation of political power to a cultural one, it also set a precedent for future presidents to emulate. Since Reagan, presidential administrations have operated with the understanding that mimetic performance is the primary means of presidential

storytelling essential in leveraging the power of the presidency through the brand of the individual president.

In his *Center Stage: Media and the Performance of American Politics* (2007), communications scholar Gary C. Woodward asserts the centrality of performance media in the operation of contemporary presidential politics. He argues that the staging of events and the maintenance of the media are critical in successfully wielding power in contemporary American politics. Further, he suggests that since contemporary Americans now implicitly understand that political events are organized into a narrative framework that resembles drama, they expect their presidents to serve both as narrator and central protagonists of political events (85). These observations describe the impact of Reagan's precedents not only on his successors but on their audiences.

While many presidents organized events into a narrative structure, Reagan established the expectation that these events would resemble dramatic performance. As Timothy Raphael describes it:

In its fecund transmission, Reagan's pervasive image accreted into a performative vision of a nation defined by an ongoing process of reinvention, renewal, and rebirth. As these moving images of 'Reagan as America' circulated through the mass communications networks that delivered them to us, their autonomy as images eroded, congealing into one continuous serial broadcast: 'America in the Age of Reagan.' (159)

As I discussed in the first chapter, presidents throughout the history of the United States have relied on successful storytelling to legitimize their authority, reinforce their agenda, and place their actions in particular frameworks. Contemporary presidents utilize and reinforce these narratives based on the precedents set by Ronald Reagan. Reagan successfully leveraged political power through his performances that nurtured a presidential brand, controlled the story by assuming the blended role of narrator and protagonist, established a predominant narrative

about the role of government in society, and set the expectations that presidential action would resemble drama.

Before examining the peculiarities of George W. Bush's performances in the remaining chapters of this dissertation, it will be useful to examine some additional explanations regarding *how* performance contributes to particular narratives. In the next section, I will look to cognitive and evolutionary theory to understand the links between presidential storytelling and contemporary presidential performance, and to provide a way of classifying particular kinds of presidential performance in the chapters to come.

## **2.2 PERFORMANCE, COGNITION, AND CLASSIFYING CONTEMPORARY PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE**

Recognizing that Reagan's presidency marked the full realization of mimetic performance as the primary mode of presidential storytelling, I now turn to *how* mimetic performances contribute to contemporary presidential storytelling. In order to explain my understanding, I borrow fundamental ideas from Bruce McConachie regarding the cognitive mechanisms that facilitate mimetic storytelling. In the chapters that follow, I will use these cognitive mechanisms to describe and analyze George W. Bush's performances of his narrative strategies.

In his 2011 essay, "An Evolutionary Perspective on Play, Performance, and Ritual," Bruce McConachie constructs a framework for understanding the key terms in his title. According to his argument, evolutionary continuity theory and cognitive science research demonstrate that "play," as an evolutionary adaptation shared by many animal species, is

necessarily the evolutionary precursor to behaviors described by the terms “performance” and “ritual.”

McConachie’s ordering of performance as derived from play corresponds with Brian Boyd’s identification of play as a necessary precursor to narrative discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. In fact, McConachie explicitly uses Boyd’s ideas to identify the fundamental link between play and performance: “playing allowed proto-humans to flourish because it increased their cognitive flexibility, especially their ability to recognize, repeat, and refine patterns” (36). Both narrative stories and the broad notion of “the arts” fall into Boyd’s particular patterns of human play according to McConachie. Thus, performance, as both an “art” and a way of telling narrative stories (drama), is a particular kind of advanced play.

In order to explain how performance functions as an advanced kind of play, McConachie describes how two particular cognitive capacities inform and encourage performance: mirror-neurons that enhance empathetic responses and double-scope blending that allows subjunctive simulation. I describe both of these attributes in the following because I will rely on them later in this chapter to categorize different types of presidential performance.

McConachie describes “mirror-neurons” as vital to the cognition of empathy. The capacity for empathy is essential in the operation of performance. As he puts it:

Although the experimental work on mirror networks in humans is far from complete, many scientists agree that these groups of neurons are fundamental to human empathy. In order to put yourself in the shoes (and mind) of another person, whether onstage or elsewhere, you must be able to read significant indications of that person’s intentions and emotions. Through mirror network processing of the muscles in another’s face and body, humans are able pick up some information about the other’s emotions and intentions, information that unconsciously informs empathetic response. (37)

He goes on to explain that recent studies in neuroscience have indicated that mirror-neurons facilitate an automated recognition of intention that does not require conscious processing of

information or connecting of dots. Whether viewing dramatic fiction or real-life events, the familiar phrase “I could tell from the look on his face” illustrates how such recognition works. McConachie further explains how the human capability for automatic and complex empathy allows people to move easily from perceiving specific instances to making general deductions (37). In order to illustrate this attribute, he compares the human capacity for empathy to the more rudimentary empathy of chimps. Like some other animals, chimps have mirror-neurons and, in turn, a capacity for automated empathy. Therefore, for example, a group chimps may understand what an individual member is doing if he grabs a stick and uses it to reach otherwise unattainable food. However, there is little evidence that the other chimps would apply that understanding in recognizing any future utility in either using sticks to reach other food or in recognizing that their counterpart is hungry. In contrast, humans use such empathy both to recognize the potential of future application of such utility and to assume character information about the individual based on the subconscious reading of the person’s intentions and emotions.

This attribute facilitates the evolutionary value in the performance of narratives. Using presidential narratives as an example, the capacity to recognize the intentions behind actions, learn from them, and make judgments about a candidate or president is especially important when a particular narrative serves as character testimony. The automated perception of intention makes the performance of narratives particularly effective and efficient in encouraging the audience of such performance to make general deductions about the kinds of motivations that drive the individual president or candidate. Furthermore, because these empathic responses are automated, and hard-wired in human cognitive processing, successful performances of such character testimony can mitigate the effectiveness of later analysis, whether well-researched investigation or simply political “spin.”

The second capacity McConachie describes as central to performance as play is the capacity that allows humans to simulate fictional, or subjunctive, realities. McConachie explains that “double-scope blending” describes the capacity for the human player and audience to perceive subjunctive and actual realities simultaneously. For example, children who play “cops and robbers” understand each other fully and simultaneously as both other children and adult law enforcement officers and criminals. In cognitive terms, these children blend the concept of themselves as individuals with the concept of cops and robbers in order to create new identity as children/cops and children/robbers. This capacity allows for the performance of the narrative simulations that provide evolutionary advantages described in the first chapter of this dissertation. McConachie also points out how the attribute is critical to theatrical performance:

As I have explained in previously published work about theatre and cognition, actors and spectators unconsciously engage in double-scope conceptual blending to make possible their theatrical activity (McConachie 2008:40–55). Blending is not an option for theatrical participants; it is a cognitive necessity. (40)

While the role of double-scope blending in theatrical production will become particularly relevant in later parts of this dissertation, McConachie also identifies another performance medium in some ways more similar to political performance that requires double-scope blending: athletic competition and popular sports. He explains:

It is an easy stretch of the imagination to understand that spectators at sports events also blend athletes and roles together to create player/positions that are believable and entertaining. Because athletes usually perform the same positions from one game to the next (unlike actors who switch roles frequently during their careers), spectators typically conflate the athlete with the role. But spectators also know that Ben Roethlisberger is not only a quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, for example; they can unblend Big Ben and the role of quarterback whenever they wish. Pittsburghers upset about Roethlisberger’s scandalous sexual assault have an added incentive to consider the man apart from his leadership of the Steelers. (40)

The conceptual blending of the athlete and the role marks an important and complex parallel between the performance of professional sports and the performance of professional politics, especially in the case of the presidency.

“The office” of the presidency and “the man” who holds that office are often conceptually blended in the same way that football quarterbacks are blended with the athlete that plays the position. The convention of addressing the president as “Mr. President” instead of “Mr. Bush” exemplifies the extent to which in many ways the blending in politics is more complete. However, the importance of that blending is most clearly recognized when the office and the man are unblended. The distinction, apparent in scandal or in deliberate disentanglement by political opponents, often results in questions about the legitimization of particular presidencies.

Following the Watergate scandal, it became clear that Richard Nixon’s claim that when the president does something it is not illegal was not an acceptable defense of his actions. The man Richard Nixon was legally culpable for the actions he took even while he held the office. Similarly, Bill Clinton’s liaisons with Monica Lewinsky would likely have been left unrevealed had his legal team been successful in their argument that the man ought to be exempt from civil prosecution so long as he held the office. In both cases, the actions of the men were considered as separate from the actions of the office in order to insulate the office from the offenses of the men.

The best historical example of deliberate disentanglement probably rests with the controversy surrounding John Tyler’s ascension to the presidency following the death of William Henry Harrison in 1821. Dubbed “His Accidency” by detractors, Tyler successfully overcame the attacks on his legitimacy to set the precedent that a vice-president not only took on the

responsibilities of the office but also “became” the president following the death of the elected president. Conservatives provide a recent example in the execution of a narrative strategy to “unblend” Barack Obama from the office. The controversy over Obama’s birthplace typifies this scheme. The utility of the claim that Obama was secretly foreign born is clearly not legal (since nothing approaching valid evidence emerged), but nor was it as simple as an easy means for ginning up xenophobia. Rather, I submit that the strategy revealed the advantage of unblending the man and the office: disentangled from the office, the man can be denigrated without denigrating the office.

Like theatrical and athletic performance, presidential performance necessarily incorporates a conceptual blending between the role of the office and individual who holds that office. Similarly, presidential performance relies on the empathetic understanding of its audience to both perceive presidential intention and make broader deductions about how those intentions testify to individual character and reveal the important turning points in presidential narratives. These cognitive attributes are critical to all kinds of performance that contribute to presidential narratives. In the following subsections, I describe three particular categories of presidential performance in more detail: ritual, performance of character, and narration of action.

### **2.2.1 Presidential Ritual**

McConachie states that behaviors described as ritual derive both from play and from performance. According to his approach, ritual describes a performance that serves a “higher” power or an entity that has power beyond that which is apparent. The conceptualization of such power is tied to a cognitive attribute fundamentally the same as the attribute Fukuyama cites as

his second building block of political order (discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation): finding causation in invisible or transcendental forces. To describe this attribute, McConachie uses the term *hypersensitive agency detective device* (or HADD), following anthropologists like Stewart Guthrie, Jonathan Lanman, Justin Barrett, and Harvey Whitehouse. McConachie describes the attribute:

Like conceptual blending, HADD draws on the specifically human cognitive operation of projection. Many psychological experiments have demonstrated that people often claim that they have detected animate agency in images, natural events, and accidents where none really exists. People believe they can see the face of a deity in the embers of a fire, for example, or are able to perceive the workings of the gods in a thunderstorm. In these instances, they have projected their own notion of agency into a situation they cannot explain to enable them to understand it as the will of some superhuman power. Evolution primed our species to be hypersensitive about invisible agents that might do them harm. Better to interpret that rustling behind the bush as a lurking tiger about to pounce than to ignore the signs of possible agency!" (43)

The conceptualization of such superhuman power requires the ability to understand the notion of an invisible agent and use double-scope blending to imagine the kind of entity that invisible agent might be. Ritual, as performance executed *for* the benefit such a superhuman, invisible agent, incorporates HADD much like Fukuyama's second building block incorporates religion and destiny into the architecture of the political order.

Political ritual, like religious ritual, is a particular kind of performance in the service of a transcendent power. I suggest that in the case of American political tradition, traditional religious agents are only one of the invisible agents that political rituals serve. American political rituals serve broad, abstract notions that are tied to the ideas of American nationhood. These ideas are often contested by divergent political groups and often explained through the contested notion of "American exceptionalism."

American exceptionalism is the notion that the United States is not only unique among other nations, but somehow peculiarly unique. As historian Seymour Martin Lipset describes it in his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1996):

The United States is exceptional in starting from a revolutionary event, in being “the first new nation,” the first colony, other than Iceland, to become independent. It has defined its *raison d’etre* ideologically. (18)

Throughout, Lipset explains that the notion has long been used by political forces of various ideologies and that the precise meaning of the term and the validity of its central ideas have long been contested.

Donald E. Pease, in his recent *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), for example, argues that the notion of “American exceptionalism” describes a malleable state fantasy used by American political leaders, especially since the end of the Cold War, to rationalize American imperialism abroad, among other state actions. Historian and critic Godfrey Hodgson, in *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009), agrees that the original exceptional American ideals have been co-opted by neo-conservative imperialists.

Without stepping into the debates about either the term’s precise meaning or its overall validity, I point out that there is general agreement that the notion, however contested, is critical to understanding political communication in the United States. The idea that “America” originated from a transcendent power, be it political ideology or divine destiny, as opposed to ethnicity or accidental geography has long influenced political campaigns, governance, and criticism of American politics. Perhaps, at its root, the idea of exceptionalism was necessary to inaugurate and maintain a government in place of the divine right of kings. In any case, it fits with Fukuyama’s understanding of how the human interest in finding causation in invisible or transcendental forces shapes the political order.

While at its founding the American government rejected the notion of divine rule through a monarchical order, the notion of higher powers was incorporated into many of the nation's founding documents. Not surprisingly, then, the ideology of exceptionalism is often intertwined with faith in a god that favors the exceptional American nation. This pair of beliefs has supported many American political actions over the course of the past three centuries. "Manifest Destiny" and the devastation leveled against Native American populations in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and using the developing world to fight proxy wars against "godless" communists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stand as obvious examples.

I submit that as a fundamental institution of the American political order, the presidency itself represents a manifestation of such transcendent political ideals. Therefore, presidential rituals reinforce the American ideals that serve as transcendental agents in the American political order. These rituals facilitate the double-scope blending that allows a president to be perceived both as George W. Bush and "the President" at once. Presidential rituals also demonstrate that the individual officeholder is capable of showing deference to institution and humbling himself before posterity. In other words, on the surface, these rituals foster the transcendence of the "office" over the "man." This idea not only maintains the legitimacy of the office, but also validates the worthiness of the man to hold it. Presidential rituals reinforce the blending of the "office" and the "man" and, in many cases, serve as climatic events in the personal narratives that legitimize the man as worthy of the office.

On January 20, 2009, Chief Justice John Roberts botched Barack Obama's constitutionally-stipulated oath of office. The incoming president repeated a version closer to the official oath, but never repeated the exact phrasing as it appears in the Constitution. Regardless, the inauguration proceeded and for all practical purposes Obama took office as planned.

However, the new administration quickly arranged for the ritual to be repeated the following day. This action demonstrates the significance of such rituals in the American political order. Had the oath ritual not been executed entirely faithfully, the new president might be subject to either legal protestations or a broad sense of illegitimacy in the view of Constitutional tradition. Either of these outcomes might have undermined Obama's interest in celebrating the "becoming president" climax of his "historic campaign" narrative and provided his detractors an obvious means to unblend him from the office.

Rituals like the oath of office are often built into the presidency by structure and tradition. Some of these are codified rituals referenced in the Constitution, such as when the president reports to Congress through the performance of an annual "State of the Union" address. Many presidential performance rituals are merely traditional, such as the president's public "pardoning" of a turkey in the days prior to the national holiday of Thanksgiving. These performances constitute a large portion of the president's visibility to the viewing public, and are essential in supporting the legitimacy of the narrative strategies of presidential administrations.

### **2.2.2 Presidential Character: Repeated Patterns of Behavior**

Because presidents are constantly in the public eye, their everyday patterns of behavior also shape how their stories are perceived. Marvin Carlson acknowledges that the display of culturally coded patterns of behavior consciously executed for the benefit of others marks a kind of performance. I believe that there are particular repeated patterns of behavior (such as speech, physical gestures, and leisure activities) that make particular contributions to the operation of presidential narratives. These kinds of presidential performance have the potential to validate or

undermine particular elements of presidential narratives, especially the character testimony inherent in storytelling.

Merlin Donald explains the automatic nature of such repeated patterns of behavior as a key feature of mimesis (289). He argues that actors, for example, repeat patterns through rehearsal to the point where they are able to weld together what he calls “hierarchies of skills” into complex systems. For theatrical actors, this may include many behavioral actions, including speech patterns, dialects, repeated gestures, or the playing of particular musical instruments. For candidates and presidents, these kinds of behaviors often validate or undermine the character testimony inherent in particular narrative strategies.

Obviously, Ronald Reagan’s successes in promoting his own brand relied on the likability of such personal performances. In the first section of this chapter, I cited his vocal performances as both communicating his capacity for being strong and empathetic at once. Elements of Bill Clinton’s performances provide another quality example of this category of presidential performance.

Bill Clinton’s patterns of behavior exemplified how these kinds of presidential performance can reinforce particular narratives without undermining others. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton made use of several prominent narratives to support his election. Clinton’s expert grasp of sophisticated political issues and his intellectual acumen were obvious to those interested in recognizing those aspects of his candidacy. Yet Clinton, like many successful presidential candidates before him, performed the role of “man of the people” with particular success. Clinton’s humble origins were made nationally prominent during the biographical video presented during the Democratic National Convention in New York. *The Man from Hope* was a documentary-style film presented to convention delegates and broadcast

for the millions watching on television. It famously highlighted Clinton's personal success in the context of his humble roots. I suggest that his speech, physical gestures, and leisure activities all reinforced this aspect of Clinton's personal story.

Two aspects of Clinton's repeated speech patterns supported his "man of the people" character. His Arkansas dialect not only revealed his geographic origins, it also legitimized his identity as having working-class roots. As Brenton J. Malin explains in his study of masculinity in the media during the Clinton years, "Clinton's perceived 'redneck' background [has] allowed ...him to distance himself from the corrupt world of monied politics, positioning himself as another kind of candidate, more down to earth and in touch with 'the people'" (78). This was no doubt helpful in his ability to be elected to public office in Arkansas following his education at Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale. It also reinforced the narrative put forward in *The Man from Hope* that Clinton's humble origins shaped his intentions and actions, without undermining his obvious intellectual grasp of complex issues.

The other aspect of Clinton's repeated speech patterns that supported his character was usually coupled with his physical gestures. Clinton famously displayed a notable ability to empathize with citizens and voters. His cracking voice and empathetic physical gestures reinforced his connection to the kinds of people who shared his humble roots. These characteristics, of course, are easily recognized when they are the subject of parody, and the "I feel your pain" vocal cracks and biting of the lip were routinely imitated by Phil Hartman and Darrell Hammond on television's *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>6</sup> These comedy sketches amused because they aped vocal and physical gestures easily recognizable as central to Clinton's performances.

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<sup>6</sup> I should point out that not all such parodies, of course, can be relied upon to validate the presence of repeated patterns of behavior. Chevy Chase's portrayals of Gerald Ford as exceedingly clumsy on the same program come to mind as less-reliable mimicry.

Finally, the Clinton campaign foregrounded his saxophone playing as a personal hobby by having the candidate perform on the late-night television program, *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989-1994). By playing the saxophone on late-night television, Bill Clinton reinforced several narrative strategies at once. The informality of the performance and the television program chosen likely contributed to generational and perhaps – as Toni Morrison famously suggested – racial narrative strategies. Regardless, the particular musical instrument reflects a connection to popular music as opposed to high culture music. Consider the effect on the “man of the people” narrative had Clinton instead performed classical violin for a television program aired on PBS.

These kinds of performances reinforced the humble roots of Bill Clinton and his innate ability to be “in touch with the people.” Through these kinds of repeated patterns of behavior, Bill Clinton nurtured the “man of the people” narrative and displayed character testimony consistent with other strategic narratives without undermining elements of narratives that posed potential conflict.

### **2.2.3 Narration of Presidential Action**

Presidential performance also includes singular or serial acts intended to announce and legitimize political decision-making, especially in times of great crisis. For example, the president usually addresses the nation via television following a perceived national or international crisis.

Similarly, the president might unveil a new policy initiative through a national address often followed by a series of supporting public appearances. Like Reagan, contemporary presidents use these performances to *control the story*. They usually claim the simultaneous roles of protagonist and narrator, define the common terms and forms of reference, and locate the events

in question in broader context. In the following paragraphs, I use a series of addresses by George H.W. Bush to illustrate how this kind of presidential performance contributes to presidential storytelling.

On August 2, 1990 military forces of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. In the months that followed, George H.W. Bush gave a series of addresses to narrate the actions he was taking, as president, to respond to Saddam's invasion. I believe that through these performances, Bush effectively narrated the actions he was taking as president/protagonist. In these addresses, Bush defined the common terms and forms of reference, located the events in question in broader context, and communicated the plot points of the narrative the administration used to legitimize its authority, to maintain public support, and to set its actions in a constructed historical framework.

After holding a brief press conference with the media on the day news of Saddam's invasion broke, the president's first formal address to the nation on the events occurred on August 8, 1990. Using the familiar Oval Office backdrop used by his recent predecessors in the television age, Bush started telling the story by identifying himself as reluctant hero:

In the life of a nation, we're called upon to define who we are and what we believe. Sometimes these choices are not easy. But today as President, I ask for your support in a decision I've made to stand up for what's right and condemn what's wrong, all in the cause of peace. At my direction, elements of the 82d Airborne Division as well as key units of the United States Air Force are arriving today to take up defensive positions in Saudi Arabia. I took this action to assist the Saudi Arabian Government in the defense of its homeland. No one commits America's Armed Forces to a dangerous mission lightly, but after perhaps unparalleled international consultation and exhausting every alternative, it became necessary to take this action. Let me tell you why. (bushlibrary.tamu.edu)

Next, Bush introduced the villain. He accused Saddam Hussein of an "outrageous and brutal act of aggression." Later in the speech, Bush emphasized the ineffectiveness and dangers of appeasement by referencing Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. This allusion provided a way for his

audience to understand the scale of Saddam's villainy and the absolute necessity of the president's actions. In contrast to Saddam's actions, undertaken "without provocation or warning," the president informed the American people that he had ordered a trade embargo against Iraq, froze all their government's assets, and consulted with prominent international leaders. These actions demonstrated a swift, yet prudent, response from a strong, yet wise, protagonist.

Bush then identified four principles that would guide his further action and serve as his goals. These included Saddam's withdrawal from Kuwait, the restoration of Kuwait's government, general political stability in the Persian Gulf region, and the protection of American lives. In each of the subsequent prominent addresses on the subject, Bush controlled the story by reiterating these principles.

Bush also took the opportunity to set the events within the framework of a new foreign policy paradigm. Alluding to the end of the Cold War, Bush declared:

We're beginning a new era. This new era can be full of promise, an age of freedom, a time of peace for all peoples. But if history teaches us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms.

In doing so, Bush implied that taking appropriate actions in this case would decide the nature of the international order that was taking shape following the end of the Cold War. Therefore, the importance of the events were larger than the importance of Kuwait itself, and therefore, within the sphere of influence from the "leader of the free world." In this speech, Bush identified the actors, provided the backstory, defined the hero's mission, and contextualized the importance of his success.

On September 11, 1990, the president addressed a joint session of Congress. Since the rituals associated with such addresses are usually reserved for issues the president deems to be of

greatest national importance, this setting emphasized the contextual significance of the story.

Addressing a joint session of Congress also reinforced Bush's blended identity as the man and the office. In the address itself, the president reasserted the earlier components of his story, communicated additional actions since the August address, and re-emphasized the historical significance of the story. First, he recapped the earlier events of the story:

Within 3 days, 120,000 Iraqi troops with 850 tanks had poured into Kuwait and moved south to threaten Saudi Arabia. It was then that I decided to act to check that aggression.

He updated the story to incorporate how the international community had followed his lead in condemning the invasion and resolving to resist Saddam's aggression:

We can now point to five United Nations Security Council resolutions that condemn Iraq's aggression.

Other world leaders joined and validated Bush's mission. The president described then updated current status of action:

I cannot predict just how long it will take to convince Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. Sanctions will take time to have their full intended effect. We will continue to review all options with our allies, but let it be clear: we will not let this aggression stand.

He then re-emphasized the stakes of his mission by added a new, fifth, guiding principle by using the historical term "New World Order" to describe the post-Cold War context of the events:

Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective -- a new world order -- can emerge: a new era -- freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.

On October 1, 1990, Bush addressed a session of the United Nations. His speech reiterated much of the content in his previous addresses, congratulated the organization for its Security Council resolutions, contextualized the historical importance of the events for the members, and let the president's American audience know that he was pursuing the justice demanded by his mission. He closed the speech with the language of grand historical narrative:

And so, let it be said of the final decade of the 20th century: This was a time when humankind came into its own, when we emerged from the grit and the smoke of the industrial age to bring about a revolution of the spirit and the mind and began a journey into a new day, a new age, and a new partnership of nations.

Later in 1990, the United Nations passed a resolution that authorized the use of force to expel Saddam's forces from Kuwait.

On January 16, 1991, the president again addressed the nation from the Oval Office. He announced the beginning of military action against Saddam. In that address, like the ones before it, the president updated his audience on the current action and reiterated the characterizations inherent in the story since the beginning:

Just 2 hours ago, allied air forces began an attack on military targets in Iraq and Kuwait. These attacks continue as I speak. Ground forces are not engaged. This conflict started August 2nd when the dictator of Iraq invaded a small and helpless neighbor. Kuwait -- a member of the Arab League and a member of the United Nations -- was crushed; its people, brutalized. Five months ago, Saddam Hussein started this cruel war against Kuwait. Tonight, the battle has been joined.

The President emphasized the virtuous pursuit of non-violence:

This military action, taken in accord with United Nations resolutions and with the consent of the United States Congress, follows months of constant and virtually endless diplomatic activity on the part of the United Nations, the United States, and many, many other countries.

He foregrounded his leadership of the coalition sending the troops to battle, and his personal agency in being able to bring them home:

When the troops we've sent in finish their work, I am determined to bring them home as soon as possible.

Within two months, the president delivered an address, transmitted across the United States, to declare an end to military combat in Kuwait and Iraq.

Appearing from the same location he had in August of 1990, Bush announced success in his mission on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1991:

Kuwait is liberated. Iraq's army is defeated. Our military objectives are met. Kuwait is once more in the hands of Kuwaitis, in control of their own destiny. We share in their joy, a joy tempered only by our compassion for their ordeal. Tonight the Kuwaiti flag once again flies above the capital of a free and sovereign nation. And the American flag flies above our Embassy.

The president recounted the story's beginnings:

Seven months ago, America and the world drew a line in the sand. We declared that the aggression against Kuwait would not stand. And tonight, America and the world have kept their word.

Finally, the president reminded his audience of what the end of the conflict might mean for the future, and, by using the first person plural, took credit for the victory, with the humility appropriate for a reluctant hero:

This war is now behind us. Ahead of us is the difficult task of securing a potentially historic peace. Tonight though, let us be proud of what we have accomplished. Let us give thanks to those who risked their lives. Let us never forget those who gave their lives. May God bless our valiant military forces and their families, and let us all remember them in our prayers.

This address marked the final action in the president's Gulf War narrative.

These addresses allowed the president to garner popular, Congressional, and international support for the military intervention in the Persian Gulf. The narrative employed by the administration was so effective that Bush's popularity was considered to be at historically high levels in the months that followed. While the resulting popularity proved somewhat fleeting, Bush's performances successfully communicated a war narrative that helped the administration legitimize its authority, maintain support of the public, and set its actions within particular moral and ideological frameworks. The successful performance of the war narrative may have also served as an example for Bush's son to follow. His performances as president anchor the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

### 3.0 THE BUSH DYNASTY NARRATIVE

As cognitive scientist George Lakoff and other scholars like Drew Westen have pointed out, the political right has effectively controlled contemporary American political discourse by appealing to the parts of the human brain most open to persuasion: emotion and subconscious understanding. Meanwhile, the American political left has too long focused on an intellectual, conscious “rational choice” model of political persuasion that is largely ineffective. As George Lakoff explains, successful narrative strategies have been essential to the appeal of the right and their absence has been detrimental to the left. As I stated at the end of the first chapter of this dissertation, I believe that this deficiency contributes to an imbalance in American politics that threatens to tilt American government toward a reactionary ideology. The central hypothesis of this dissertation rests on the premise that the presidential narrative strategies of the reactionary right can be resisted by exposing how they function, rejecting their validity, and countered through the development of contrasting narratives.

Consequently, I return to Lakoff’s study as entry point to integrating the framework of understanding developed in the first two chapters of this dissertation with the subject matter of the remaining chapters. As I have addressed in the first part, narrative strategies have long been critical to presidential popularity and, in contemporary America, these narratives are transmitted through the performance media that dominate American social and political life. The remaining chapters of the dissertation focus on the narrative strategies inherent in George W. Bush’s performance as president and a case study of plays that respond to his performance by portraying him on the theatrical stage.

Central to Lakoff's understanding of effective narrative strategy is that the narratives put forward by political forces must be both simple enough to be perceived primarily at the emotional level and they must be recognizable to subconscious perception. In order to be effective with the American viewing/voting public then, the narratives must share deep structures with other stories prevalent and recurring in American popular culture. Lakoff refers to the easily recognizable story patterns as "deep narratives." These are the stories by which we understand ours and others' roles in our families, our careers, and our societies at large. They are the stories we learn first as small children and then apply to the people we meet and the people we become throughout our lives. In our families we might recognize a particular member as the benevolent ruler, in our careers we might consider ourselves heroes, in society we might view particular others as victims. As Lakoff explains:

The roles in narratives that you understand yourself as fitting give meaning to your life, including the emotional color that is inherent in narrative structures. The very fact that we recognize these cultural narratives and frames means that they are instantiated physically in our brains. We are not born with them, but we start growing them soon, and as we acquire the deep narratives, our synapses change and become fixed. A large number of deep narratives can be activated together. We cannot understand other people without such cultural narratives. But more important, we cannot understand ourselves – who we are, who we have been, and where we want to go – without recognizing and seeing how we fit into cultural narratives. (33-34)

We similarly associate political leaders with roles recognizable to us from the stories our parents told us, the stories taught in schools, and the stories dramatized on television. These associations, when positive, provide automatic character testimony that legitimizes authority and emotional identification that garners popular support.

As Lakoff continues to explain, cognitive attributes he calls "neural binding" foster the links between these deep narratives and the perception of particular persons and events: "narratives and frames are not just brain structures with intellectual content, but rather with

integrated intellectual-emotional content. Neural binding circuitry provides this integration” (28). For a clear example, Lakoff points to the idea of the Hero, who shares recognizable attributes in fairy tales, comic books, and religion. Neural binding describes the automatic recognition of the character as a hero and the automatic allocation of positive attributes from other heroes to the newly discovered one. In other words, when someone successfully presents himself in a way that encourages you to perceive him as a hero, then the idea of him is bound to your idea of other heroes.

Neural binding similarly constructs links between the chronological understanding of events and the emotional reactions triggered by particular structures. In short, we expect certain patterns of events in stories because we have, often subconsciously, made neural connections between a given new story and the ones we already know. Thus neural binding links particular narrative frames to others at the subconscious level. This linkage, of course, is not absolute since you may perceive new information that might shift the individual’s role from hero to villain. We are not inclined, however, to accept readily information that contradicts the story within the deep narratives – as long as we continue to consider the individual to be the hero. In fact, Lakoff argues that neural binding filters perception and effectively hides reality to insulate the accepted narrative from conflicting information that might challenge it (37).

According to Lakoff, conscious awareness of how these connections work in the brain offers the best opportunity to prevent such filtering. In other words, exposing the connections developed by deep narratives empowers rational thought. Accordingly, the best antidote to the political triumph of those that most effectively deploy these strategies is to expose the neural binding on which their narrative strategies rely.

I believe the simple and easily recognizable narratives employed by George W. Bush and his administration, when successfully communicated through presidential performance, promote the neural binding of George W. Bush and his actions to positive elements of deep narratives. I argue that George W. Bush legitimized his authority, maintained support of the voting (viewing) public, and set his actions within particular moral and ideological frameworks primarily by using three simple and easily recognizable narrative strategies. Using Lakoff's terminology, I label these three as: the dynasty narrative, the redemption narrative, and the rescue narrative. I believe that George W. Bush communicated and supported these narratives through particular categories of presidential performance I introduced in chapter 2. Namely, I approach these narratives as told through ritual, repeated patterns of behavior, and narration. These kinds of performances allowed Bush to introduce and characterize the stories' main characters, communicate the plot points, define the common terms and forms of reference, and locate the significance of the story in a broader context.

Each of the remaining chapters is generally divided into three sections. The first section identifies a simple and easily recognizable narrative strategy used by the Bush campaign/administration. The second section of each chapter describes Bush's performance in service of these narratives. In the third section of each chapter, I address responses to those narratives. I introduce each of these sections by offering a representative example of the political institutions of the left failing to expose, reject or replace Bush's narratives. I then examine the theatrical plays included in this case study in order to identify how they may counter (by exposing, rejecting, or replacing) the narratives crafted by Bush's performance. Each relevant play is addressed in a subsection; however, the plays share aspects that respond to the narratives in similar ways. Therefore, I present the plays in an order that facilitates a layered discussion

relative to the central narrative of the chapter. I focus my examination on the contrast of particular performance moments, the relationship between the narrative structures of the administration and the narrative structure of the plays, and, when pertinent, the critical and popular reception of the plays in relationship to the Bush narrative. Finally, I conclude each chapter by considering the effectiveness of the theatrical responses in comparison to the anti-narratives as performed by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert on late-night television.

#### SUBJECT PLAYS:

- *Stuff Happens* (2004) by David Hare dramatizes the events that led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The play premiered in London in 2004 and has since been widely produced in the United States and throughout the world. In chapter 5, I address how this play responds to the rescue narrative.
- *The Passion of George W. Bush* (2004) is a musical written by Adam Mathias and John Herin with music by Alden Terry that premiered at the 2004 New York International Fringe Festival (during the Republican National Convention). The musical, which satirizes the Bush administration's politics via association with Mel Gibson's popular religious film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), paints George W. Bush as a witless puppet dominated by other members of his administration and his parents. His religion is used to control him, and he is seemingly fooled by the stories his puppet masters tell him. The play had a limited run during the Fringe festival and has had only limited production since. However, its subject matter caused it to be widely reviewed. In chapters 3 and 4, I consider this play as a response to the dynasty and redemption narratives.

- *You're Welcome America: A Final Night with George W. Bush* (2009) by television and film star Will Ferrell. Ferrell wrote the play and starred in the production throughout its limited run on Broadway in early 2009. Over the course of the play, recorded and later broadcast on HBO, Ferrell reprises his *Saturday Night Live* impersonation of Bush. The play primarily consists of Ferrell addressing the audience directly, and is framed by costume changes and comical props that overtly mock the images of the president promoted by the Bush administration. I address the performance in all three chapters since in its structure as a celebration of the whole Bush presidency, it explicitly responds to the Bush dynasty, redemption, and rescue narratives.
- *When We Go Upon the Sea* (2010) by Lee Blessing imagines a hypothetical event where a former president named “George” is being put on trial by the international court at The Hague. Blessing’s cast of characters consists of the former president, a hotel concierge, and the concierge’s wife who is also a prostitute. These two spend the evening trying to comfort the accused on the night before his trial. I address this play in all three chapters.

In his presidential memoir, *Decision Points*, George W. Bush recounts his father, the former president George H.W. Bush, visiting the Oval Office on his first day in office:

“Mr. President,” he said. He was wearing a dark suit, his hair still wet from the hot bath he’d taken to thaw out.

“Mr. President,” I replied.

He stepped into the office, and I walked around the desk. We met in the middle of the room. Neither of us said much. We didn’t need to. The moment was more moving than either of us could have expressed. (109)

Presumably, Bush suggests the emotional force of the meeting derived in recognizing that the men had just become only the second father-son pair of American presidents. Alternatively,

Bush might be referring to the sense of accomplishment and pride the son and father might respectively experience when the son matches his father's accomplishments. Regardless, the way George W. Bush remembers the moment indicates the significance of the father-son relationship in his presidential story.

I believe that the George W. Bush campaign and presidential administration capitalized on Bush's identity as his father's son to encourage viewers and voters to confer heroic virtues onto Bush, distrust his opponents, and associate his triumph with a positive outcome for the greater good. The narrative strategy identified characters, structured events, and managed expectations that fostered neural associations between Bush's story and stories that share critical elements of the same deep narratives. George Lakoff loosely refers to the shared structure of these kinds of stories as the deep narrative of "dynasty" (34).

The dynasty narrative is the story of noble fathers and the sons that must live up to their standards, reclaim their thrones, or redeem their sins. Stories that utilize the general formulation of the dynasty narrative may derive from divergent origins, serve different cultural purposes, and appeal to diverse audiences. They differ in details, are told through a variety of storytelling media and, based on the story's outcome, may evoke contradictory emotional responses. However, cognitive science has demonstrated that we connect these stories to one another through subconscious neural binding. Therefore, when introduced to a presidential candidate primarily as a son of an already-known figure, we make intellectual and emotional connections to the stories of fathers and sons that reinforce the deep narratives we already know.

Prior to describing the details of Bush's use of the narrative, I believe it will be useful to identify other cultural stories (religious, literary, and popular) that share reliance on the dynasty

narrative. Since the relevance of these stories to my study derives from their broad familiarity, I assume the reader's general acquaintance and refrain from greater attention to their descriptions.

The most obvious example comes from the central story of Christianity. The one, true god sends his only son, Jesus Christ, to Earth so that he may redeem the sins of men (created in God's image). In order to do so, the son must preach his father's message and endure the persecution and execution. Through this preaching and suffering, the son redeems his father's people. At the climax of the Christian story, the narrative direction pivots on a fantastic reversal as Jesus rises from the dead and thereafter ascends into heaven to be seated at the right hand of his ruling father.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presents another iteration of the dynasty narrative. At the beginning of the play, the ghost of Prince Hamlet's father appears to him in order that the son might avenge the father's murder and remove the offending usurper, Claudius, from the Danish throne. Unlike the Christian story, of course, the son in Shakespeare's play has no happy ending, despite the ultimate death of the villain Claudius.<sup>7</sup> In contrast with Shakespeare's play, Disney's retelling of the same basic story in its animated *The Lion King* (1994) concluded with

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare's three play chronicle (*Henry IV, Parts One and Two* and *Henry V*) of Henry V's adolescent mischief, maturation and final battlefield triumph deserve mention here, too, since the overarching narrative bears striking parallels to all three of the Bush narratives I address in the dissertation. Unlike other dramatic iterations of the deep narrative, however, the plays are probably only known to a small portion of the American electorate, so that the links between them may not be as direct for the typical American voter as the other stories I mention. Additionally, the parallels have been well-noted. For example, in his psychological biography, *The Bush Tragedy* (2008), *Slate* editor Jacob Weisberg argues that the themes contained in Shakespeare's plays about Henry V are, "the hidden themes of our nation's political life for the past seven years; the complications of the father-son relationship, the awkwardness of dynastic power, and the issues around a willful leader's underlying motives" (xxv). Weisberg's assertions articulate another way of looking at the links between the deep narrative and Bush strategy. However, his underlying premise that the dynastic motivation underpinning Bush's actions were "hidden" exemplifies how easily some critical observers – even those as astute as Weinberg – erroneously dismiss links to deep narratives as secondary to our primary understanding of political action. While some on the left might have found that the link between Bush personal stories and his motives for war surprising or offensive, I would suggest that those affected by the Bush narratives were already rooting for Bush to fulfill his dynastic destiny, accept God's commission, and rescue America. [For other examples of sources that link Bush to the Henry V plays, see Paola Pugliatti *Shakespeare and the Just War Tradition*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, Limited., 2010 and Alan Stone: "For God and Country," *Boston Review*, February-March 2005 < <http://bostonreview.net/BR30.1/stone.php>>]

the prince's ultimate ascension to his father's throne. This story was not the only popular film to prime the voting public for Bush's use of the dynasty narrative.

In 1999, filmmaker George Lucas released the first of his *Star Wars* prequels. The original trilogy of immensely popular science fiction films (released in 1977, 1980, and 1983) dramatized the story of the hero Luke Skywalker, son of the evil oppressor Darth Vader, who had once been the morally good Anakin Skywalker. In those films, Luke discovers his father's identity and eventually turns him back to the "good side" while saving the galaxy from military despotism. The prequel films told the story of the father's descent into the "dark side" that coincided with the galaxy's subjugation.

Each of these stories shares obvious elements. Fathers and sons are the central characters. The son is charged with redeeming the father's moral or political authority. In order to do so, action is demanded of the heroic son. This action, at the heart of the story's event structure, may require the son to endure some combination of suffering, scheming, violence, or adventure. Through either his moral perseverance or acquisition of moral strength, the son's final actions resolve the narrative. In the end, our emotional response to the narrative rests on the outcome of the son's trials.

The George W. Bush dynasty narrative incorporates the same fundamental character types, event structures, and emotional triggers inherent in the other stories. Like each of those, the story includes specific variations to the general structure. For example, in the Bush dynasty narrative, Ronald Reagan, not George H. W. Bush, is the benevolent ruler whose ideals must be restored. Reagan's place in the story is critical since, as addressed in the second chapter, he is the idealized president both of popular culture and of the American political right. Like both King Hamlet and the "Jedi" mentors to Luke Skywalker's father in those stories, Ronald Reagan

exemplifies the model benevolence and wisdom suitable for leadership in the Bush dynasty narrative.

Bush's father had been a loyal lieutenant to Ronald Reagan, but as president himself George H. W. Bush had been a flawed successor to Reagan. However worthy of respect he might be, the elder Bush had failed in protecting the nation from Clinton. Resembling Polonius' weakness more than Anakin Skywalker's complete moral failure, George H. W. Bush left Washington as a one-term president. In the 1992 election, he was unable to defeat the usurping and dishonorable liberal, Bill Clinton.

Clinton had not been elected by the majority of voters and represented a departure from the benevolent rule of the Reagan-Bush years. The salacious revelations about the sexual escapades in the oval office exemplified Clinton's villainy. Despite his impeachment, the crafty Clinton, nicknamed "Slick-Willie" by some, could not be removed from office. Like the evil emperor in *Star Wars*, the corrupt Claudius, or the nefarious lion Scar, Clinton was skilled and difficult to defeat. As the 2000 election approached, Clinton's loyal vice-president seemed ready to continue his kind of anti-Reagan presidency. The son of Reagan's loyal, noble, but ultimately flawed successor presented a new hope to stop that from happening and restore Reagan-esque rule.

In his essay, "From Hubris to Despair: George W. Bush and the Conservative Moment" (2010), historian Michael Kazin describes the events using the same general structure. His essay focuses on George W. Bush's relationship with ardent conservatives, but he clearly articulates the central elements of the Bush dynasty narrative as crucial political background for what the right expected of the George W. Bush presidency. Starting with Reagan, Kazin writes:

Reagan was a movement conservative; he had launched his own political career with a stirring televised speech for Goldwater in 1964. And his rhetoric and personality were excellent recruiting forces. His strong ratings in opinion polls – at least after the economy recovered in 1983 from recession – and success at establishing “big government” as the “problem” in the minds of most Americans made him the only shared hero conservatives had possessed since their movement began.

George H. W. Bush enjoyed no such status or confidence. Although he portrayed himself as the consolidator of the ‘Reagan Revolution,’ his temperament and policies seemed closer to those of the then marginal but still despised ‘Rockefeller Republicans’ from the Northeast. Libertarians mistrusted him for raising taxes, and traditionalists like Buchanan and Pat Robertson mistrusted him for giving only tepid backing to the right-to-life cause and cooperating with the leaders of the nearly defunct Soviet Union...Bush’s drubbing in the November election was almost a relief to true believers on the right. Over the next eight years, they were again able to unite against a common enemy: the Clinton administration, which conservatives viewed as a stealthy attempt to jerk the nation leftward. As the Right saw him, the slick-talking former southern governor talked like a moderate while he sought to federalize the provision of health care and refused to curb his libido even within the Oval Office, symbolic hub of America’s civil religion. (Zelizer, *Presidency* 291-292)

As Kazin suggests, the “true believers” of the right were looking to George W. Bush to redeem his father and restore Reagan-esque rule.

In order to achieve this goal, Bush obviously needed to become president. His election was the essential, climactic event of the narrative just as his father’s defeat in the 1992 marked the most significant failure of the backstory. In his presidential memoir, the younger Bush describes the kick-off of his presidential campaign in terms of his father’s defeat:

Seven years earlier, Dad’s final campaign had ended in defeat. Now I was standing proudly at his side, with a chance to become the forty-third president of the United States.” (Bush, *Decision Points* 63)

From the beginning of the campaign, Bush played the heroic son attempting to redeem his father. To the extent that voters might perceive him that way, they might confer on him the virtues of similar heroes. Furthermore, they might connect his electoral triumph with the positive resolutions of other dynasty narratives. Therefore, the son’s redemption of the father would

coincide with the restoration of benevolent power in America, just as it might have for Denmark or for that galaxy far, far away.

### **3.1 GEORGE W. BUSH'S PERFORMANCE OF THE DYNASTY NARRATIVE**

George W. Bush performed the dynasty narrative through narration, ritual, and patterns of behavior. In this section, I address some examples of the performances that supported the dynasty narrative.

While the actions and words of presidential candidates, like presidents, are broadcast to screens across the country throughout campaigns, there are some events that are more likely to be viewed as whole parts rather than in edited audio and video clips. These events present candidates the opportunities to establish themselves as narrator and protagonist of their narratives. The Democratic and Republican parties' presidential nominating conventions in the summers preceding presidential elections offer candidates such an opportunity. Presidential and vice-presidential nominees deliver speeches ostensibly to accept their parties' nominations. Covered as news events, the major broadcast and news television networks transmit the speeches to broad, national audiences during prime television-viewing hours. While the media covers the primary campaigns, the conventions are the first in a series of nationally broadcast events designed to appeal to all potential general election voters. Thus the speeches are designed to introduce the candidates to the nation at large.

On August 3, 2000, George W. Bush addressed the Republican national convention in Philadelphia. Introducing himself to the voting (viewing) population, George W. Bush assumed

the role of heroic son of a president on a mission to redeem his father and restore Reagan-esque rule to America. In the following paragraphs, I illustrate how Bush, as narrator/protagonist, introduced the characters and located the events of the narrative in a broader context.

After briefly thanking the party and thanking his wife, daughters, mother, and running mate Dick Cheney, George W. Bush introduced his father:

And I want to thank my father – the most decent man I have ever known. All my life I have been amazed that a gentle soul could be so strong. And Dad, I want you to know how proud I am to be your son. (presidentialrhetoric.com)

In this narration, Bush emphasizes the personal relationship between father and son. He defends his father and pledges his support and pride. Then he addresses his father's place in a national and historical context:

My father was the last president of a great generation. A generation of Americans who stormed beaches, liberated concentration camps and delivered us from evil. Some never came home. Those who did put their medals in drawers, went to work, and built on a heroic scale ... highways and universities, suburbs and factories, great cities and grand alliances – the strong foundations of an American Century.

Bush testifies to his father's character in the context of a glorious past to prepare his audience for what he, the son, is called to do:

Now the question comes to the sons and daughters of this achievement. What is asked of us?

At this point, Bush introduces Bill Clinton, a fellow member of his generation and villain of the Bush dynasty narrative:

Our current president embodied the potential of a generation. So many talents. So much charm. Such great skill. But, in the end, to what end? So much promise, to no great purpose. Little more than a decade ago, the Cold War thawed and, with the leadership of Presidents Reagan and Bush, that wall came down. But instead of seizing this moment, the Clinton/Gore administration has squandered it. We have seen a steady erosion of American power and an unsteady exercise of American influence.

Linking his father to Reagan and Gore to Clinton, Bush identifies the good and the evil in the narrative. Unsurprisingly, he continues by narrating all the ways in which Clinton and Gore failed the nation since Reagan and Bush had left the office and arrives at what that has taught him about good leadership:

Our nation's leaders are responsible ... to confront problems, not pass them on to others. And to lead this nation to a responsibility era, a president himself must be responsible.

The speech culminates with a flash-forward to the expected climax of the dynasty narrative:

And so, when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of our land, I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God.

Finally, Bush connects his personal success with the restoration of the rule of Reagan:

I believe the presidency – the final point of decision in the American government – was made for great purposes. It is the office of Lincoln's conscience and Teddy Roosevelt's energy and Harry Truman's integrity and Ronald Reagan's optimism.

To ensure the binding between his election and the restoration of Reagan is complete, Bush's final image evokes the imagery of Reagan's "Morning in America:"

Americans live on the sunrise side of mountain. The night is passing. And we are ready for the day to come.

Having defined the characters, ordered the events and located them in the context of a broader historical struggle, Bush established the narrative for new viewers and reinforced it for those who had followed his primary campaign.

If the convention speech provides the first opportunity a candidate has for such an address, the closing address at the final televised debate may represent the last. The debates may be the most important and widely-watched events of the campaign (Pika 77). Bush concluded the final debate with Gore by again presenting a forward glimpse to the climax of the dynasty narrative:

For those who have not made up their mind, I would like to conclude by this promise. Should I be fortunate enough to become your president, when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of the land, but I will also swear to uphold the honor and the dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God. Thank you very much. (debates.org)

By requesting votes based on his oath to uphold the honor and dignity of the presidency, Bush not only presented a not-so-subtle accusation against Clinton as dishonorable and undignified, he also teased the emotional climax of the dynasty narrative.

The ritual of presidential inauguration is crucial to the Bush campaign's dynasty narrative. As addressed in the second chapter of this dissertation, the inauguration ritual maintains the legitimacy of the office of the presidency and validates the worthiness of the man to hold it by blending the new officeholder and the office. For George Bush the son, the oath of office authenticates his worthiness for the office and serves as the climatic event in his dynasty narrative. Through the inauguration ritual, Bush "becomes" the president, and thus redeems the Bush family as the rightful heirs to the Reagan legacy. At the same time, contemporary America, damaged by Clinton, can be reconnected to the transcendent political ideals of American exceptionalism. Reagan's presidency embodied these ideas and Bush would restore that kind of rule.

As I addressed in the chapter 2, Reagan's patterns of behavior contributed to the success of his brand. Michael Kimmel has pointed out that Reagan presented the American people with an opportunity to return the oval office to a president with "cowboy masculinity" following the sensitive presidents of the 1970s (196). In contrast to Reagan's cowboy masculinity, Kimmel points out that Bush the elder had difficulty shaking his reputation as a "wimp" and Clinton embodied the "new man:"

In 1992, the nation elected a man closer to the median age rather than someone old enough to be the national father, a candidate whose warm camaraderie with his

contemporaneous running mate gave friendship a political valence, and a husband whose partnership-marriage with a career-oriented, savvy lawyer withstood publicly expressed difficulties, marital therapy, and antifeminist critics who had already castigated her as a ball-busting bitch. Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton thus became the first two-career couple to ever occupy the White House; in Bill Clinton we seemed to have elected our first new man as president. (216)

Of course, these were not Clinton's only qualities that could be easily contrasted with Reagan's cowboy masculinity.

As addressed in chapter 2, Clinton's "man of the people" credentials were reinforced by behaviors that emphasized his capacity for empathy. His saxophone hobby may have testified to his connections to common people, but was surely not an archetypal leisure activity for a rugged cowboy.

George W. Bush's routine and leisure behaviors directly contrasted with Clinton's. Despite being born and educated in New England, George W. Bush played a Texan whenever possible. Unlike his father or his brother Jeb, George W. Bush spoke with a strong Texas dialect. Like Clinton, the maintenance of regional dialect may have supported Bush's claim to connectedness with the "common man." In clear contrast with his predecessor, however, Bush displayed a consistent verbal clumsiness. As president and candidate, he routinely botched pronunciation, used ineloquent terms, and jumbled figures of speech, metaphors, and aphorisms. This performance rebutted the intellectual sophistication obvious in Clinton's speech. Bush's speech testified that he had none of the seemingly sensitive but ultimately cunning qualities of Clinton.

Bush's leisure activities and attire also contrasted with Clinton's and aligned him with Reagan. Instead of playing music, Bush enjoyed clearing brush on his Crawford, Texas ranch as a primary leisure activity. Like Reagan's attire on his California ranch, Bush donned cowboy boots and boleros. While those paying critical attention might recognize the obvious ostentation

of such attire, the Bush campaign and administration had no interest in subtlety. Kimmel describes Bush as “a cowboy iteration derived less from the real western frontier than from cinematic westerns” (278). This observation seems obvious since Bush’s cowboy-president model had, in fact, been a cinema actor. Furthermore, both Reagan and Bush routinely used phrases and terms directly referencing cinema. (e.g., “Go ahead, make my day” and “Wanted dead or alive.”) Nonetheless, Kimmel’s apt description illuminates the degree to which Bush was interested in aligning himself to Reagan through cowboy masculinity.

These performances supported the dynasty narrative that was central to the 2000 presidential campaign. However, the dynasty narrative continued to inform Bush performances as president as the administration sought to take advantage of the Reagan brand. For example, in a visit to the World Trade Center site in the days following 9/11, Bush famously responded to a group of rescue workers who were trying to tell him that he could not be heard: “I can hear you. I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon” (georgewbushcenter.com). The moment was so memorable the George W. Bush Center has preserved the megaphone as an important piece of presidential history. In *Decision Points*, Bush recalls that crowd responding by chanting “USA! USA! USA!” (149).

The resonance of the performance may have also derived from its similarity to a particular moment in the Reagan presidency. Speaking at the Brandenburg Gate in Germany on June 12, 1987, Reagan memorably called out:

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall! (Cannon 774)

George W. Bush's performance evoked Reagan's call in several ways. First, Bush utilized the imagery of torn down architecture. Second, Bush echoed Reagan's escalating calls for action. Finally, Bush's performance appeared improvised and rooted in circumstances of the moment: prompted by the workers who could not hear him. Reagan's biographer Lou Cannon assigns a similar improvisational impetus for Reagan's angry call to Gorbachev. Cannon claims that Reagan was not actually angry with Gorbachev but with the East German police, who "just before his speech had herded people away from loudspeakers near the Brandenburg Gate to prevent them from hearing what Reagan had to say" (774). Thus, Bush's shouts echoed Reagan's in imagery, structure, and emotion.

I submit that these performances nourished the connections between George W. Bush's dynasty narrative and the deep narratives present for many in the American electorate. The utility of Bush's dynasty narrative probably garnered him votes in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential election, legitimized his authority, and helped the administration win public support for its policies.

### **3.2 RESPONSES TO THE DYNASTY NARRATIVE**

Oppositional political institutions, especially those falling under the umbrella of the Democratic Party, failed to counter the Bush dynasty narrative with any effectiveness. The 2000 general election campaign stands as a clear (and perhaps notorious) example of this dynamic. As vice-president of an administration with remarkable approval ratings during years of unprecedented economic growth, Al Gore seemed well-positioned to succeed Bill Clinton as president. His

position, however, was complicated by the scandal surrounding Clinton's inappropriate sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky (and his subsequent denials of that relationship). Reportedly personally disappointed in Clinton's actions at the center of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the sitting vice-president not only restricted the incumbent president's campaign appearances, but also refused to associate himself with Clinton's successes (Wilentz 411). In so doing, Gore not only lessened any advantage he might expect from being associated with a president whose policies were still popular, he also played right into the Bush dynasty narrative that required Clinton to be viewed as an antagonist.

By refusing to defend Bill Clinton, Gore left unchallenged the Bush dynasty version of the outgoing president as the dishonorable usurper. He also legitimized the conflation of personal failings and political villainy by himself appearing unable to separate the two. Furthermore, as Drew Westen points out, Gore's declining to defend his old running mate also legitimized the "character" links between Clinton and Gore necessary for the Bush dynasty narrative to have coherency (*Political* 313). Apparently ignorant of the power of the Bush narrative strategy, Gore tried to sidestep it altogether and educate and persuade the rational voter through mastery of fact and logical argument. This did nothing to expose, reject, or replace the implication that as Clinton's lieutenant, he could not restore "honor" to the Oval Office. Additionally, Gore was suffering through increasing perceptions that he was "a compulsive fibber and exaggerator about his own achievements" (Wilentz 409). Consequently, his principled refusal to defend Clinton's personal failings appeared all the more to like an attempt to disguise himself as the villain's true heir within the framework of the Bush dynasty narrative.

Unlike the Gore campaign, three of the four subject plays respond directly to aspects of the Bush dynasty narrative. In order to examine the central hypothesis of this dissertation, this

section focuses on aspects of the plays that expose, reject, or replace elements of the Bush dynasty narrative.

### **3.2.1 *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush***

In *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush* (2009), Will Ferrell played George W. Bush in a limited-run performance consisting mainly of a one person direct address to a Broadway house. Later broadcast on the premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO), the performance is framed as Bush being dropped off in New York to celebrate his presidency with Broadway theatre-goers. In reality, the performance allows Ferrell to culminate his long standing portrayal of the president on television's *Saturday Night Live* (1975 - present). While this analysis focuses on Ferrell's theatrical performance, I point out that the development of Ferrell's Bush (and the tenor of the play's humor) derives from those performances broadcast on late night television.<sup>8</sup>

Ferrell's performances, both on *SNL* and in *You're Welcome, America* may exemplify the most obvious counter-narrative to the Bush dynasty narrative. At the same time, his performances also expose elements of the Bush dynasty narrative's construction and reject some its central features. Like the Bush dynasty narrative, the Ferrell counter-narrative maintains the focus on the prominence of the Bush father-son relationship. Rather than conforming to the ascending, restoration structure inherent in the dynasty narrative, however, the counter narrative

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<sup>8</sup> The influence of these and similar performances has been the subject of significant study and some debate. Many critics suggest that these performances merely offer a playful outlet that allows viewer/voters to recognize and accept the candidates' obvious faults. (For an example, see Ben Voth's analysis of "*Saturday Night Live* and Presidential Elections" in Baumgartner and Morris' *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*.) I would argue that such analyses ignore the importance of personality and personal narrative in political communication. For example, as I hope to point out here, Ferrell's portrait of Bush as a "dim-witted frat boy" responds to Bush's dynasty narrative. (Day 51)

inverts the trajectory of the action. In this counter-narrative, George W. Bush is the unworthy son of political dynasty whose rise to power coincides with national fall.<sup>9</sup> In this counter-narrative, his political triumphs reflect the pitfalls of dynastic rule rather than the climactic restoration of a rightful heir. Following this counter-narrative, Ferrell's Bush is the undeserving recipient of fortune, fame, and opportunity afforded to the children of political leaders.

Consequently, Ferrell mimics Bush's behaviors in a manner that conforms to the inverted dynasty narrative. George W. Bush is unqualified for the office (especially by his intellectual inferiority), attains office only by family privilege, and is an embarrassment to the country.

Ferrell's performance as Bush also capitalizes on the double-scope conceptual blending inherent in theatrical performance. An audience that perceives Ferrell as both Ferrell and Bush binds his George W. Bush with other popular roles played by Ferrell. These roles largely consist of intellectually deficient, incompetent characters who fail in their attempts to achieve success at particularly challenging careers or tasks. When they do succeed, it is generally accidental. In his review of the performance for *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley wrote: "Ultimately this production is less about the legacy of George W. Bush than it is about the comic persona that has been perfected by Will Ferrell." Intended as criticism, Brantley suggests that Ferrell's comic persona overwhelms his performance's response to Bush. In contrast, I believe the assessment reflects Ferrell's success in blending the actor and the character. In other words, Ferrell's

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<sup>9</sup> This counter-narrative applied to Bush, of course, is not limited to Ferrell's performance. The institutional left in politics and media routinely charged Bush with intellectual inferiority, especially relative to his famous family members. In an extreme example, the cable network Comedy Central produced two seasons of an animated program called *Lil' Bush* (2007-2008) that portrayed George W. Bush as a diabolical child living in his father's White House.

On the theatrical stage, David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (a play that I address in detail in chapter 5 of the dissertation) introduces George W. Bush with the following words:

The elder son of a Kennebunkport dynasty, George W. Bush is considered the joke of the family, beside his more favoured brother Jeb. He only enters politics at the age of 47. (9)

While Hare's drama focuses primarily elsewhere, George W. Bush is introduced to the audience as though George W. Bush being considered the joke of the family is simple fact.

performances may bind Bush to other characters played by Ferrell much like Bush's performances deliberately evoke heroic sons. Brantley may observe accurately that this may undermine Ferrell's ability to offer nuanced critique of the Bush legacy, but the performance does reject Bush as the heroic son by identifying him instead as the amusing fool.

Ferrell mirrors Bush's unsophisticated speech patterns in a manner that depicts word choice and pronunciation difficulties as the result of intellectual deficiency. Ferrell's Bush tries to pronounce words properly, but he cannot. In trying to explain the weak evidence brought to the UN that justified the invasion of Iraq, Ferrell's Bush explains to the audience that the administration found:

Evidence from one witness that no one had ever heard of before without any other backup that Iraq was trying to get yellow cake uranium through the country of – and I always have trouble with this pronunciation – Niger... Niger... Niger --- phew! I tell you right now you mispronounce that one you find yourself in a world of trouble. You know what I mean? You do not want to be that guy, trust me.

This humorous moment highlights how Bush's incompetence in speech overwhelms his capacity to handle critical responsibilities like going to war. In another example of linking verbal incompetence to professional incompetence, Ferrell's Bush considers his words and declares:

Removing Saddam Hussein from power was the right decision early in my presidency. It is the right decision now. And it will be the right decision ever.

The screen behind the actor immediately displays the words "Real Quote" to signal to the audience that the words just spoken are real quotes from George W. Bush, and Ferrell's Bush is merely dramatizing them.

*You're Welcome, America* also incorporates humorous sequences that rely on the idea that certain performative elements of the Bush dynasty narrative are manufactured to hide the truth of the inverted dynasty narrative. These moments expose and reject the validity of Bush's

cowboy masculinity. For example, early in the play, Ferrell's Bush talks about his Crawford ranch:

This ranch means so much to me and Laura. Nothing is more American or therapeutic in my opinion than obsessively clearing brush. Oh hell, who are we kidding? We're hoping to sell this place by June. Karl Rove made me buy it back in '99 to seem more folksy. Can I be honest with you? I don't know what the fuck I'm doing out here. I almost got lock jaw three different times from cutting myself on rusted barbed wire. It's a hot, dusty, heat-stroke inducing hell hole out here. We're so excited now that we moved into our whites-only community in Dallas, where I can pay immigrants to clear my brush for me – the way God intended.

This moment exposes the Bush performance of the narrative (as Rove's scheming), rejects its validity (Bush's ignorance), and replaces it with the elements of the counter-narrative (the privileged Bush paying immigrants to do his manual labor).

Some of the most effective humor in *You're Welcome, America* derives from the negative contrast of George W. Bush with his father inherent in the counter-narrative. For example, in a particularly humorous scene Ferrell's Bush re-enacts a story of about the Bush men at the Crawford ranch:

It was fun, all the Bush guys reminiscing, clowning around in an old abandoned mineshaft, when wouldn't you know, it collapses on us. We'd be trapped for three days, and the whole while, my Dad's up my ass saying things like, "Goddammit, George! Did you test this shaft to see if it was safe?" I'm like, "No! Of course not! It's just an abandoned mineshaft, you just go climb around in it! Besides, I thought you'd like it, 'cause it's historical!" And then Jeb's like, "Everyone shut up, we've gotta conserve oxygen!" I'm like, "I don't give a shit! God's got a plan for me! If this is the way I go, then this is the way I go!" Then my Dad's like, "Gimme a fucking break! Did you tell anyone where we were going?" And I'm like, "No! I didn't! I only thought we'd be gone an hour!" He's like, "You've gotta be kidding me!" All of a sudden, Marvin starts screaming, "I crushed my maid with a car!" And Neil starts yelling, "I once had sex with thirty Thai hookers at once!" And then Jeb's like, "I'm being serious, let's conserve oxygen!" I'm like, "Enough with the damn oxygen!" And my Dad's like, "Why are you the only one in this family that speaks with a Texas accent? It makes no sense!" I'm like, "Do I? Do I have an accent? 'Cause if I do, I can't hear it!"

This moment not only dramatizes the inverted dynasty narrative, it also exposes a central element of the dynasty narrative's construction. In the story-within-the-play, the stressful

situation leads to overt conflict between the competent men (George the father and Jeb) and the incompetent (George the son). At the same time, the other sons (Marvin and Neil) confess to moral crimes in moments of panic. At the climax of both of these building conflicts, George the father turns on George the son by calling into question the validity of his Texas dialect. In this moment, the theatricality of climactic humor reinforces the inverted dynasty narrative and exposes a central component of Bush's performance of the dynasty narrative.

Ferrell's performance also rejects Bill Clinton's role in the Bush dynasty narrative by conferring Clinton's vices onto Bush. As addressed in the first section of this chapter, the role of Clinton as a villain is critical to the Bush dynasty narrative. Within the narrative, Clinton has profoundly dishonored the oval office with his sexual exploits. This dishonor is so great that the villain deserves grave consequences (impeachment), and the office requires a mythic restoration by a heroic figure. Bill Clinton has so soiled the office that only a rightful heir to the honor and dignity of the office can redeem it. The assumption of power by Bush the son therefore cleanses the office of Clinton's indiscretions.

In *You're Welcome, America*, Bush is not only just as much the philanderer as Bill Clinton, but he's also an exhibitionist. In one sequence Ferrell's Bush and an actor playing Condoleezza Rice engage in a series of sexually-charged dances on a set that incorporates elements of the oval office. At other moments in the performance, Ferrell's Bush shocks the audience by displaying a photograph of his penis on the screens at the back of the stage. Finally, peppered throughout the performance are a series of recurring jokes related to Ferrell's Bush's memories of a long term homoerotic friendship he maintained in the 1970s.

Some of these jokes can be dismissed merely as a resort to juvenile sexual humor often present in other works of Ferrell. However, another play in this case study, *When We Go Upon*

*the Sea*, shares similar imaginings. If Bush commits sexual transgressions that match, or exceed Clinton's, then the primary claim to his superiority is undermined. Ferrell's Bush engages in the sexual dance with a co-worker in the oval office that mimics Clinton's conduct. Ferrell's Bush exposes his genitalia to surprised audiences, as Clinton was accused of exposing himself to surprised women. Ferrell's Bush constantly refers to "western-style hand jobs" he shared with his old friend; while Clinton's sexual activities with Monica Lewinsky infamously did not include vaginal penetration. These juxtapositions reject the primary moral contrast between Bush the son and Bill Clinton that is critical to the dynasty narrative.

### ***3.2.2 The Passion of George W. Bush***

In contrast to Will Ferrell's widely popular portrayal of George W. Bush, *The Passion of George W. Bush* (2004) is a relatively little-known theatrical response to the Bush dynasty narrative. Nonetheless, the musical play presents a clear and direct response to the deep narrative links between the Christian story and the Bush dynasty narrative. As its title suggests, the central structural conceit of the musical overlays the Christian story with George W. Bush's personal and political narrative. The play, written by Adam Mathias and John Herin with music by Alden Terry, premiered at the 2004 New York International Fringe Festival the same week as the Republican National Convention that nominated George W. Bush for re-election. The following analysis of the play focuses on how the play draws attention to and, in its resolution, objects to the link between the Christian and Bush dynasty narratives.

Like the Bush dynasty narrative, *The Passion of George W. Bush* likens George W. Bush to Jesus. Unlike the Bush dynasty narrative that functions by relying on subconscious neural links between deep narratives, the play satirizes the religious aspects of Bush's appeal by explicitly blending the narratives. By mimicking the content and structure of the Christian gospels, the play overtly replaces Jesus with George W. Bush. For example, in the play's musical prelude, the chorus prophesizes the coming of George the son:

A tiny seed becomes a shoot.  
The shoot becomes a mighty shrub,  
And so a babe becomes a man,  
A man the world shall know as Double-yoo! (1)

Then, like the Christian gospels that incorporate short scenes of Jesus as a child, the play incorporates a scene from Bush's early family life. Highlighting family heritage and personal destiny, Bush's parents sing about what it means to be a Bush:

You're part of the breed,  
So follow our lead.  
You're bound to succeed,  
Like me,  
And be  
Like a Bush...(5)

In its premise and initial scenes, *The Passion of George W. Bush* exposes the Bush dynasty narrative by drawing obvious attention to the link between it and the Christian dynasty narrative.

As the story continues, the play incorporates elements of the counter-narrative presented in *You're Welcome, America*. However, in this version of the story, George W. Bush, while privileged, is also naïve, honest, and good-hearted. Too intellectually-challenged to achieve success on his own, his success originates from the machinations of the story's villains: Dick Cheney and Karl Rove. This notion, of course, reflects another counter-narrative of the left: that Cheney and Rove are Bush's puppet masters. Weaving that narrative into the Christian

narrative, Mathias and Herin position Cheney and Rove as evil tempters resembling Satan in his role as the tempter of Jesus. Early in the play, Cheney recognizes Bush's naiveté as an opportunity to assume power. He sings:

I'll be the captain, manning the wheel,  
Steering you on to glory.  
We'll meet our oppressors and bring them to heel,  
The mighty brought low!  
Oh, you will be my vessel.  
You will serve my plan.  
I will hide in shadow,  
The man behind the man.  
I will be your master.  
You will be my ward.  
You will be my vassal,  
And I will be your Lord! (11)

Because Cheney (as musical villain) is secretly controlling Bush, George W. Bush's election, then, does not mark the climax of the broader ascending dynasty narrative, but the temporary triumph of the villains' plans. Because Cheney and Rove are the villains in the play, instead of Clinton, the narrative problem is not resolved by the 2000 election. It must be resolved following the inauguration, so the play continues.

The remainder of the musical follows the narrative structure of the Christian story: terrible suffering and fantastic reversal. As Cheney and Rove continue to manipulate George W. Bush, the events of the Bush administration are presented in quick succession and culminate in the invasion of Iraq. Like the Christian story, the narrative then relies on a fantastic reversal following the worst of the suffering. The play's George W. Bush discovers a secret memo that details all the lies Cheney and the rest of his staff have been telling him throughout his administration. Recognizing that Cheney has been deceiving him, Bush uses the Christian bible to point out the contradictions between his actions and Christian morality. He sings to Cheney:

The Bible says: "Blessed are those who make peace,"

But we broke all our treaties; our wars never cease.  
The Bible says: "Go to your room when you pray,"  
Not: "Kneel in a classroom for public display."  
The Bible says: "Give all your wealth to the poor,"  
Not: "Change all the rules so the wealthy get more."  
The Bible says: "Do as you'd like to have done,"  
Not: "Steal someone's oil at the point of a gun." (62)

During this song, the play's George W. Bush effectively recognizes the narrative dissonance between the Christian and Bush versions of the dynasty narrative.

Ready to deliver his acceptance speech at the 2004 Republican national convention, the play's George W. Bush resigns from office as he sings:

People of America,  
The truth must be revealed!  
It's gruesome and barbaric, but still...  
It cannot be concealed.  
My administration  
Abused its power,  
Victimized the nation  
In its darkest hour.  
I didn't act alone, but the blame is wholly mine,  
And now: I must resign! (67)

Bush's parents and followers are disgusted and disgraced. However, the chorus/prophets from the opening prelude return to sing his praises:

In a time of darkness,  
And heartache and war,  
In a time of terror,  
And bloodshed and gore,  
The people beheld a great light!  
He was born to lead us,  
And free us from sin.  
Though betrayed and beaten,  
He'll rise,  
He'll rise again. (71)

Bush's resignation and renunciation of Cheney and the rest of his administration constitutes the fantastic reversal required to resolve the play's narrative. This resolution fulfills the ascending Christian narrative as predicted at the play's start.

This fantastic resolution denies the legitimacy of the link between George W. Bush and Jesus Christ. By dramatizing a narrative that can only be resolved by Bush repudiating all of his actions as president, the playwrights ultimately reject the moral worthiness of Bush implicit in the narrative link. However, in order to present this case, they intrinsically accept the deep narrative link between the Christian narrative and the American presidency central to the Bush dynasty narrative. This may limit the play's overall effectiveness as a response to the Bush strategy because it engages the strategy only on terms established by Bush. The play may offer its audience a way of understanding how Bush does not live up to the Christian model, but it does not, in the end, reject that model as irrelevant. Instead, even in ironic fantasy, the play resolves with Bush reaching the Christ-like status of the dynasty narrative. This resolution exemplifies a fundamental limitation of the play as effective response: questions regarding the extent to which Bush's policies, behaviors, or qualities actually resemble those of Jesus Christ are predicated on the notion that the two are comparable figures. Therefore, the play may inadvertently reinforce the Bush narrative strategy it might otherwise undermine.

### ***3.2.3 When We Go Upon the Sea***

Lee Blessing subtitles his *When We Go Upon the Sea* (2010), "a political fantasy." Ostensibly an optimistic fantasy for those that view Bush as a criminal, the play imagines the night before a former American president named "George" is to stand before the international court at the

Hague. Based on that description alone, one might expect the play to present George W. Bush primarily as a villain with the qualities of character associated with the liberal counter-narratives. While the play's George shares some attributes associated with that narrative, Blessing's character possesses qualities reflected in both narratives, and cannot easily be easily defined by either alone.

In an interview for InterAct Theatre's website, Blessing says that the play questions how, "We confer on our collective image of the President an entire range of utterly unrealistic, presumed virtues" (Wright). As I have argued throughout the dissertation, I believe that narrative strategies facilitate the conference of these presumed virtues onto presidents. Similarly, I believe that successful counter-narratives confer presumed faults onto presidents. *When We Go Upon the Sea* responds to both the Bush dynasty narrative and the inverse dynasty counter-narrative primarily by offering an alternative portrait of George W. Bush. In the end, this portrait of Bush serves to illustrate the play's central consideration regarding the interdependent relationship between the ruling elite and those they rule.

Over the course of the play, a hotel concierge named Piet and a woman named Anna-Lisa (that George and the audience eventually discover to be Piet's wife) provide material comfort to George in order to prepare him for his trial. Through both conversation and a progressive series of sensory vices like bourbon, cocaine, and sexual pleasure, Piet and Anna-Lisa pleasure and soothe the former president. Suspicious of their motives, George wonders what they have to gain from providing him these satisfactions. Yet throughout the evening, Piet continually reminds the former president that he is only there to provide comfort in preparation for a difficult trial. Piet and Anna-Lisa seek to make George not only literally comfortable, but also

comfortable and aware of his role as a political leader, regardless of the war crimes charged against him. This subtle conflict represents the dramatic through line of the play.

Throughout the play, Blessing offers moments that easily illustrate that George is fully self-aware of the attributes conferred on him by the inverted dynasty counter-narrative. For example, early in the play Piet asks George if he would like pharmacological help in sleeping. In declining the offer George jokingly tells Piet that he was the “best sleeping president since Reagan” (7). Later, the two share the following exchange:

GEORGE. I was once the most powerful person in the world.  
PIET. You were?  
GEORGE. That a surprise?  
PIET. No, no . . . I only thought—Well, Mr. Cheney—  
GEORGE. What?  
PIET. Nothing.  
GEORGE. That’s not funny, Piet. I ran the show. (11-12)

Rather than affirming or rejecting either of the competing dynasty narratives, Blessing presents a character that appears fully aware of the attributes people confer on him. The character’s awareness of the narrative attributes exposes and undermines them. At times, Blessing’s George resembles the dim-witted clown of the inverse dynasty narrative, but he is not fully explained by it.

Within Blessing’s “fantasy,” George is an actual person, not merely the image of a person with qualities conferred by political narratives, positive or negative. Blessing constructs a dramatic situation that places this George (a character to whom the audience has presumably attributed all the virtues or failings of George W. Bush) on the same level with Piet and Anna-Lisa (characters with no politically derived attributes). Since Piet and Anna-Lisa spend the evening convincing George of his unique role as a member of the political elite, the play exposes the mechanisms of the political hierarchy, even if the mechanisms are based on questionable

expectations or fictional constructs. For example, late in the play, the three characters discuss European conquest of the Americas:

PIET. What made them go, eh? The Europeans. Ambition? Greed?

GEORGE. Destiny. It was your destiny.

PIET. But who makes destiny, yes? Who creates the destiny?

GEORGE. God?

PIET. God. That's what they believed. God gives us the ships, the science, the military technology, the will. And God makes us say, "We burn your fields, we kill you, enslave you, rape your wives and daughters because —"

GEORGE and PIET (together). "It's our destiny." (52)

Later, Piet and Anna-Lisa illustrate that the same rules apply to George, explicitly as part of political dynasty:

PIET. And what may I ask good would it do to oppose you?

GEORGE. Not a damn bit, I can tell you that.

ANNA-LISA. We would be like the savages on the shore, glimpsing European ships for the first time.

PIET Exactly. And no more able to stop destiny.

ANNA-LISA It will be what it will be.

PIET No. No, it will not be what it will be. It will be what George wishes—George and the rest of the elite.

ANNA-LISA. Of course.

GEORGE. Not so much in the elite anymore.

PIET. You are. You are the elite. You'll be back, even if they convict you. They want a gesture to keep the illusion of justice alive, that's all. In time, they'll welcome you back.

ANNA-LISA. You're a golden child.

PIET. You always have been. (54-55)

The dramatic problem of the play is only resolved when George accepts that the structure and mechanisms of the political order, including the narratives that support his authority.

In the concluding moments of the play, morning has arrived and Piet makes the final preparations to send George to trial. Their final exchange returns to the Bush dynasty narrative and its inverse and alludes to the links between the dynasty narrative and the Christian story.

GEORGE (nodding, staring out at the sea). You sail much?

PIET. Me? Oh, no.

GEORGE. I was out one time, off Kennebunkport. All alone, years ago. Got lost—well, drunk. Same thing. Foggy day—no idea which way land was. So, I picked a heading

and just went that way. Decided I wouldn't turn, no matter what. I was either going to hit land or end up in the middle of the ocean. Didn't care which. Know what appeared out of a fogbank right at that very moment? My Dad, in the powerboat. Been looking for me for two hours. Told me to take a nap and towed me in. How about that for luck? (a beat) Know what I like about the ocean?

PIET. What?

GEORGE. I like to walk on it. (80)

The dramatic resolution of the play depicts George embracing the validity of the dynasty narrative, while the play's portrait of George rejects the character attributes that are automatically conferred by it.

With the play's title and central image, Blessing also implicitly contrasts Bush with John F. Kennedy's famous romanticization of the sea. Consider George's assertion that he is, literally, above the sea in contrast with Kennedy's remarks in Newport, RI at a dinner for America's Cup crews:

I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, and ships change, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have, in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea - whether it is to sail or to watch it - we are going back from whence we came. (jfklibrary.org)

Kennedy is also an interesting contrast since the narratives associated with his presidency ("Camelot", for example) have endured for decades and are, in great part sustained by the political left.

*When We Go Upon the Sea* achieved neither critical acclaim nor box-office success. In the *New York Times*, Jason Zinoman claims that the play "offers up the ex-president as the man we saw in public: no more, no less. That may be true, and even insightful (although I doubt it), but it isn't very interesting to watch." Zinoman's observation suggests a significant theatrical problem with Blessing's play that itself may derive, in part, from how deep narratives establish

expectations about the nature of presidential character. Since character attributes supported by deep narratives help to legitimize presidential legitimacy and authority, performances of presidents absent such attributes may appear inauthentic or boring, even, compared to the established expectations. Brantley's assessment that Ferrell's comic persona gets in the way of a more appropriate portrayal of Bush echoes Zinoman's critique of Blessing's play.

Another interesting example of this phenomenon includes popular criticism of Richard Nelson's play *The General from America* (1996). In Nelson's play, a pre-presidential General George Washington seems principally motivated by mundane concerns of military administration instead of the high-minded attributes bestowed on the Washington of presidential mythology. In reviewing the 2002 New York premiere of the play for the *New York Times*, Bruce Weber calls Jon DeVries' performance as Washington, "one of the weirdest performances in New York right now" and suggests that "his exasperated and rueful Washington has a mien and manner right out of the current day, his body language reminiscent of the addled cabdriver Jim Ignatowski played by Christopher Lloyd on 'Taxi.'"

Reviewing the same production for the United Press International, Frederick M. Winship writes:

Only Nelson's characterization of Washington and Jon DeVries acting in the role strike a false note. Audiences will find little to recognize in this eccentric impersonation of the somewhat aloof, lock-jawed Father of Our Country. DeVries is an excitable, slack-jawed busybody, weary of battling with Congress to keep the Revolution on track and exasperated by his underlings. He is totally lacking in Washington's natural nobility and gravity as recorded by most of his contemporaries.

I do not mean to suggest that any of these criticisms derive exclusively from the conflict with the expectations established through presidential storytelling. Blessing's play may be "uninteresting," just as DeVries performance may be "weird." Nonetheless, the reviews'

remarks suggest the possibility that considering presidents outside of the context of presidential mythology is difficult.

I submit that in *When We Go Upon the Sea*, Lee Blessing presents a president incapable of living up to the character attributes inherent in the dynasty narrative. In so doing, the playwright offers a response to the Bush dynasty narrative and the inverse counter-narrative by imagining the absence of the character attributes they bestow. In discussing the play, Blessing says that he understands that “unrealistic, presumed virtues” of political leaders are part of the citizen/audience expectations. At minimum, his play suggests that the narratives from which they derive are an essential mechanism of the political order. The extent to which that suggestion, itself, qualifies as an effective response to such narrative strategies is not evident, and seems unlikely to be a particularly effective response to the Bush dynasty narrative.

### ***3.2.4 The Daily Show and The Colbert Report***

The significance of late-night television in American politics has been the subject of much recent attention. Unfortunately, much of this discussion is situated on a false premise that conflates humorous or ironic content and frivolity. When discourse is limited to suppositions regarding the degree to which satirical or ironic approaches to political events or personalities can or should be taken seriously, thorough exploration of the material’s import is barely possible. Other discussion acknowledges the potential impact of such material on voters and other political actors but rests on another flawed premise: the assumption that political effectiveness of ironic performance is necessarily minimized by the requirement on the viewer to have preexisting political knowledge or opinions before getting the jokes.

In her 2011 book, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, performance studies scholar Amber Day rejects these perspectives. Instead, Day argues that satirical works like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* influence political debate incrementally by “poking holes in the preframed narratives” and creating or mobilizing political communities (21-23). As Day clearly explains, the impact of these performances cannot be understood merely by looking for evidence of political action by their viewing audiences. As she puts it:

Of course, it is more difficult to pry apart competing voices and ideologies when we stray from the more cut-and-dried world of straight political argument and into the messier realm of entertainment and popular culture. However, it is through the more diffuse background and widely shared world of popular culture that we absorb the majority of our beliefs, ideologies, and cultural narratives. Though perhaps less spectacularly than a fiery parliamentary-style debate, it is in the everyday iterations of popular culture where the battle over hegemony is continuously waged. (20-21)

Thus, Day’s approach to these works parallels a central premise of my hypothesis: that narrative strategies contribute to political authority and that even the already-converted on the political left need tools in order to see, reject, and replace the narratives of the right. From her perspective, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* fill this need. As she explains:

*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* both excel at pointing up the cycle of public relations spin and media amplification without interrogation that seems to define contemporary political discussion, which is certainly a more foundational and complex issue than is typically engaged by late-night comedians. While it is not unusual for a comic to imply that the political administration is deceitful, the parodic news show tends to go an important step further in drawing our attention to an administration’s particular techniques of mystification, as well as in analyzing how the mass media contribute to the lack of substantive political debate. (90)

To the extent that an administration’s “techniques of mystification” serve its particular narrative strategies, then Day argues that these television programs have demonstrated a capacity for exposing those techniques, rejecting the narratives, and presenting counter-narratives.

For the sake of identifying and utilizing material for comparison, I accept Day's assessment of these television programs. Doing so enables me to examine a well-known alternative performance model for resistance to the Bush narratives in comparison to the plays addressed in the dissertation. The comparison, of course, is imperfect. Performance on the theatrical stage and the digital distribution of cable television differ in many ways that I will not address in greater detail. For example, I submit as givens that television audiences are much larger than theatrical audiences and that the television programs consist of new performance scripts per each recording while the theatrical performances largely rely on stable and repeated scripts. However, there are other points of comparison more useful in understanding and evaluating the nature and effectiveness of the theatrical responses. In order to illustrate these, I look to particular instances where the television programs respond to the Bush dynasty narrative and compare these responses to the subject plays.

*The Daily Show* broadcasts four nights a week (Monday through Thursday) on Comedy Central, a television network available on basic cable. Since 1999, the show has been hosted by Jon Stewart, who had previously performed as a stand-up comic and occasional screen actor. The show's format blends the features of a standard thirty minute news program with those typical of the late-night talk show. Borrowing from news programs like ABC's *World News Tonight*, Jon Stewart "anchors" *The Daily Show* by reporting headlines and narrating transitions between in-depth stories. Other correspondents provide in-depth analysis and report on special topics that often include interviews with people who may or may not be familiar with the satirical tone of the program. Similar to many late night talk shows (like NBC's *Tonight Show*), *The Daily Show* incorporates Stewart's interviews with special guests, usually entertainment

figures or authors appearing to promote new commercial works. Unlike other late-night talk shows, however, *The Daily Show* guests often include government officials and political critics.

The program's format affords Jon Stewart not only the ability to criticize and illuminate the behavior of political figures, but perhaps more importantly, the electronic "news" media that define political discourse and facilitate the communication strategies of political authorities.

Stewart's 2004 appearance on the CNN program *Crossfire* reveals Jon Stewart's interests in such media criticism. Joanne Morreale describes the appearance:

[Stewart] assailed hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson for presenting their predictably partisan, polarized party line positions as if there were substantive debate. In Stewart's words, "you're doing theater when you should be doing debate. You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably." When Begala and Carlson responded by criticizing *The Daily Show*'s own lack of substance, Stewart made a distinction between the standards to which a supposedly legitimate debate program should be held and his own by reminding them that his show "follows puppets making phone calls." At the interview's close, Carlson implicitly endorses Stewart's view by expressing in frustration, "I thought you were going to be funny! Come on, be funny!" (Baumgartner 104)

While the *Crossfire* episode afforded Stewart the opportunity to articulate his criticism of the political news media explicitly, his daily burlesques of media performance illustrate how such media typically serve the communication strategies of political entities instead of questioning them. Looking at a few examples of Stewart responding to the Bush dynasty narrative will allow me to illustrate this dynamic.

As early as November of 1999, Stewart established what would become a decade-long series of criticisms of George W. Bush's attempts to demonstrate moral superiority that would restore "honor" and "morality" to the country. Bush's focus on these themes, of course, is central to his dynasty narrative. Reporting on a campaign event where Bush calls for schools to prioritize teaching morality, *The Daily Show*, like other news media transmitted clipped video footage of the event. Bush is shown saying that schools should teach "the moral landmarks that

should guide a life.” In response to this clip, Stewart looks into the camera and explains: “Bush's moral landmarks might include being born rich, taking a four year coke-hazed stumble through an Ivy League school and then being magically selected to be president” (thedailyshow.com). Stewart literally frames Bush’s performance with deadpan disclosure of its inherent hypocrisy. Furthermore, by drawing attention to his potential ascension to the presidency as itself an achievement of questionable morality, Stewart presents the liberal counter-narrative: the combination of Bush’s unearned privilege and “frat boy” personality make him, not Bill Clinton (or Al Gore) unsuitable for the presidency. By juxtaposing the audio and video footage of Bush calling for the teaching of morality in the school system with simple statements that characterize the counter-narrative, Stewart rejects and replaces the aspects of the campaign event designed to reinforce the Bush dynasty narrative. Implicit in Stewart’s performance, of course, is the difference between his framing of Bush’s appearance and the reporting that might occur on a “real news” program, which would surely not question the moral authority inherent in Bush’s biography, and therefore, merely broadcast Bush’s appearance in the service of the Bush dynasty narrative.

Emphasis on Bush’s barely credible moral authority is echoed in the subject plays, of course. As I addressed earlier, both *You’re Welcome, America* and *When We Go Upon the Sea*, for example, confer Clinton’s moral vices on Bush. Similarly, both of those plays foreground Bush’s substance abuse issues and “frat boy” image. Yet neither is able to address the media’s complicity in the Bush dynasty narrative nearly as well as Jon Stewart does by merely performing through a similar media framework. The plays may present a counter-narrative to Bush’s but Stewart’s performance presents the same counter-narrative *and* exposes the media through which the Bush narrative is effectively communicated.

Later in the 2000 Republican primary campaign, Stewart drew attention to another important aspect of the Bush dynasty narrative facilitated by news media. On March 1, 2000, Stewart reported on the struggle between Bush and Senator John McCain. Displaying still photographs of both candidates, Stewart then reported that:

Both John McCain and George W. Bush are vying to become the rightful heir to Ronald Reagan. A tall order considering neither of them has strengthened our national defense, contributed to the fall of communism, or ever worked with a chimp. (thedailyshow.com)

Over Stewart's shoulder, a still photograph of Ronald Reagan acting in the 1951 film, *Bedtime for Bonzo*, appears. This report draws attention not only the obvious struggle among conservative candidates over being the rightful heir to Reagan (thus illuminating another critical aspect of the Bush dynasty narrative), but it also highlights the insubstantial nature of the links between historical icon and candidate-rightful heirs. Reagan's film career provided the left various opportunities for poking fun during his presidency, and Stewart reprises those jokes in order to illuminate and undermine the struggle to be Reagan's heir. While Ferrell's performance as Bush might call to mind the Reagan's cinema cowboy, none of the plays responds to the Reagan aspect of the Bush dynasty narrative as explicitly as does Stewart.

*The Daily Show's* most robust response to the Bush dynasty narrative came with a parodic Bush biography video during coverage of the 2000 Republican National Convention. Jon Stewart introduces the video as "an early version" of the biography film. The video, titled *George W. Bush: from Wealth to Riches* perfectly mimics similar videos presented at political conventions, with still photographs of the candidate accompanying a narrative voiceover. The spine of the film's narrative parallels the counter-narrative embodied in Will Ferrell's performance as Bush. The film begins:

George W. Bush has overcome an incredible lack of obstacles. (thedailyshow.com)

Highlighting Bush's privileged origins, the narrator continues:

His father, a struggling magnate, worked hard to have his servants keep food on the table. He later put himself through Yale after being awarded the coveted Barbara Bush scholarship.

The biography continues by presenting Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War as incredibly grueling as evidenced by a letter he wrote his mother wherein he suggests that he might be late to a regatta celebration due to training exercises. After briefly addressing his struggles in the business world, the video explicitly links Bush's dynastic entry into politics:

The call to public service beckoned, after a once in a lifetime meeting with the vice-president of the United States of America. It was a thrill he would never forget.

The accompanying photograph is, of course, of George H.W. Bush with his eldest son. The video concludes with the following statements:

Today, after all his success, it is the hardships George W. Bush has overcome that have given us this Republican candidate for president. George W. Bush: the kind of man that has traditionally been elected president.

In many ways, the video serves as a prophylactic to the Bush dynasty narrative. Using the same filmic devices as the campaigns themselves, *The Daily Show* foregrounds Bush's family identity as illustrative of why he should *not* be elected, instead of why he should be elected. The video mocks the notion that he has accomplished anything by undermining all of his success as a product of his privilege instead of his hard work. By suggesting (humorously) that his political career was inspired by a rare meeting with his father, *The Daily Show* implies that Bush's father had little time for him, and that George W. Bush is not even a suitable heir to the legacy of George H. W. Bush.

Later during the coverage of the Republican National Convention during the first week of August in 2000, Jon Stewart consults with two in-studio analysts charged with assessing Bush's performance. The comic exchange highlights George W. Bush's inability to live up to his father.

Addressing *Daily Show* cast member Steve Carrell, Stewart asks:

Is George Bush is a leader with a purpose, a man of character who can unite our country and get things done?

Carrell responds with a deadpan:

Yes, but his son is running this time.

The exchange is crafted as if Carrell is overplaying a bad and obvious joke. So Stewart turns to the other analyst, Vince DeGeneres, and asks the question again:

Is George Bush is a leader with a purpose, a man of character who can unite our country and get things done?

DeGeneres responds:

Sure, sure. Oh, you're serious? No, no.

Through each of these moments, *The Daily Show* rejects elements of the Bush dynasty narrative by mimicking the means through which the Bush narrative is told. Stewart's reporting of headlines presents implicit contrast with typical news media reporting of campaign speeches and strategies. The lampoon campaign video biography exposes how such films serve narrative strategies and offers an alternative meaning of the candidate's personal history. Finally, the exchange among Stewart, Carrell and DeGeneres is comic reflection of the "talking head" political analysts who, as Stewart suggested on *Crossfire*, merely repeat party lines instead of conducting or articulating objective analysis.

In 2005, one of *The Daily Show*'s ostensibly conservative in-studio analysts, Stephen Colbert, launched a companion program titled *The Colbert Report*. Colbert's program is a

burlesque of conservative political programs, especially those produced by Fox News, and Colbert's performance is a full-time burlesque of the conservative personalities at the center of those programs. Where Stewart parodies the "mainstream" media and laces his program with candid accounts of his own perspective, Colbert "plays" the conservative commentator at all times, usually even outside of the confines of *The Colbert Report*.

Like Stewart's, Colbert's performances also offer potential responses to Bush narrative strategies. Most (in)famously, Colbert attended and gave a speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner. Comedians are often invited to the dinner to "roast" the president, who usually attends. Maintaining the conservative media persona, Colbert mocked President George W. Bush, who sat just a few feet away, with tongue-in-cheek praise. At the heart of a long speech, Colbert explicitly addressed the communication strategies of the administration (some of which I address within this dissertation):

I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only stands for things but he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers. And rubble, and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world. (youtube.com)

Like his counterpart Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire*, Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner provided him with a signature moment that illuminated the operating principles of his television performances. Through an enduring and consistent ironic performance, Colbert plays the role of media promoter of conservative communication strategies. Without restraint, his character unapologetically embraces those strategies. Thus, by exaggerated mimicry, Colbert exposes the importance of conservative media personalities in the right's communication strategies. In particular moments, his performances also expose the operations of presidential narratives.

On the November 13, 2006 *Colbert Report*, for example, Stephen Colbert responded to a *Newsweek* article that suggested that members of George H.W. Bush's administration had been needed to rescue a faltering George W. Bush administration. During a regular piece called "The Word" where Colbert's direct address is augmented by accompanying text that often speaks the subtext for his remarks, Colbert responds to *Newsweek's* claims. Hypothetically quoting Bush, Colbert says to his father:

I'm an adult now, you are not the boss of me. (colbertnation.com)

At the same time the screen text communicates an aspect of a common counter-narrative:

Dick Cheney is.

Colbert continues by saying:

I can do whatever I want and you're just going to have to get used to it.

The screen reads:

Congress did.

Colbert:

I don't live by your rules.

The screen:

Like the Geneva Convention.

Finally, Colbert says:

Listen up, I've done things you'll never do.

The screen reads:

Like get re-elected.

Through this comic bit, Colbert takes on the Bush dynasty narrative by ostensibly supporting it and taking it to an extreme. Colbert extends the notion that Bush can outdo his father in

breaking laws and international treaties. His hyperbolic performance magnifies aspects of the dynasty narrative in order to undermine it.

Both Stewart and Colbert rely on embodying the mechanisms of media communication in order to expose, reject, or replace the Bush dynasty narrative. The plays I addressed earlier do not address the media directly. Instead, they focus on Bush's performances or the narratives themselves and leave the media's roles in transmitting and framing those performances largely unexplored. This is probably a direct function of the way that the form of theatrical events resembles Bush's own performances while the form of Stewart's and Colbert's performances parodies the forms of the "news media."

This distinction between the theatrical responses and the television programs provides the latter a significant advantage in effectively responding to the Bush strategy. Since the late night news parodies use actual footage of Bush's performances, they are more easily perceived as credible alternatives to the administration's strategies. They present "stories" about Bush using the same digital representations of Bush used by the "real" news media. As Timothy Raphael suggests in the context of the Reagan presidency (and as discussed in more detail in chapter 2 of this dissertation), contemporary citizens perceive reality through mediatized sounds and images (6). Stewart and Colbert's effectiveness exploits this mode of experiencing reality by re-framing Bush's own performances to resist the administration's narrative strategy.

In contrast, the theatrical responses offer alternative, subjunctive, versions of Bush performances themselves. In the case of the three subject plays examined in this chapter, this limitation does not rule out the possibility of effective theatrical responses to Bush narrative strategies since the plays do expose, reject, and replace aspects of the Bush dynasty narrative. However my examination does suggest the possibility that the late night news parodies respond

to the Bush dynasty narrative more completely and effectively in great part because the television programs operate through the same media used by the president in performing the narratives. In the following chapters, I will return to Stewart and Colbert in order to examine how these same characteristics apply to the responses to the Bush redemption and rescue narratives.

#### 4.0 THE BUSH REDEMPTION NARRATIVE

Embedded within the Bush dynasty narrative is a period of George W. Bush's personal history that might be described as an extended adolescence. Prior to redeeming his father and restoring rightful rule to America, George W. Bush had to redeem himself through a personal conversion away from substance abuse and other "youthful indiscretions" and toward Christianity and adult responsibility. While this maturation serves as a component to the broader Bush dynasty narrative discussed in chapter 3, the redemptive structure of his conversion story also functions as an independent narrative with deep links to other cultural stories.

George Lakoff labels these kinds of stories as redemption narratives (29). In various iterations of the redemption narrative, the protagonist begins the story as a scoundrel or loser of some kind. After experiencing some sort of traumatic event, the scoundrel's behavior turns to the moral or legal good and enormous success or happiness results. Like the standard dynasty narrative, the plot trajectory of the redemption narrative is ascending. The protagonist rises from despair or mediocrity to achieve greatness. Yet these narratives exhibit particularly broad appeal because, unlike the dynasty narrative, the narrative structure can apply to any person, regardless of his father's identity. Consequently, according to Lakoff, these stories provide a hopeful template for ordering the events in our own lives, regardless of our social position.

Many significant cultural stories follow this basic structure. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his disciples a parable that is known as "the Prodigal Son." In this story, a wealthy man has two sons. The younger of these asks for his inheritance early and proceeds to waste it. After a famine hits the area, the younger son finds himself so desperate to eat that he tries to steal food

scraps from pigs. On the verge of starving to death, the son returns home to beg his father for work and food. His father rejoices at the sight of his previously lost son and orders that the fattened calf be killed and eaten to celebrate his return. The older son, who had worked the fields loyally, complains to their father about his lavish celebration. The father explains to his older son that he must celebrate the son who “was dead and alive again, lost but now found.” (Luke 15:11-32)

Charles Dickens’ extensively adapted novel *A Christmas Carol* (1843) presents another prominent iteration of the redemption narrative. The story centers on the conversion and redemption of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge. Over the course of Christmas Eve, three ghosts haunt Scrooge and prompt him to reflect on Christmases past, present, and future. Following the trauma of that experience, he awakes Christmas morning profoundly changed and displays great acts of charity and goodness.

American film westerns are full of gunslinger redemption stories, and Bush’s cowboy masculinity likely strengthened the link between the deep narrative and the Bush redemption narrative. For example, the 1969 film *True Grit* (written by Marguerite Roberts and directed by Henry Hathaway) stars John Wayne as an aging U.S. Marshal who drinks and eats too much. Based on Charles Portis’ 1968 novel of the same name, the film dramatizes a young girl’s crusade to avenge her father’s murder. The young Mattie Ross (played in the film by Kim Darby) seeks out Wayne’s Rooster Cogburn and professes full faith in his “true grit” despite his tired appearance. In the end, Ross’ faith is rewarded, her father’s murderers punished, and Cogburn is redeemed as a hero. His perceived vices, especially his excessive drinking, establish enough character background to allow his ultimate victory to be redemptive as well as triumphant.

In contemporary American culture, another obvious site for redemption narratives is in popular sports.<sup>10</sup> As Brant Short and Dayle Hardy Short have pointed out, popular films that dramatize sports reflect the redemption narrative structure. In their words:

Rocky Balboa (of *Rocky*), Ray Kinsella (*Field of Dreams*), Roy Hobbs (*The Natural*), among many other such protagonists, are flawed in an important and fundamental manner and through some dimension of sport they earn redemption. Audiences seem willing to accept this myth when the central figure is imperfect—somehow viewers identify with this imperfection and seem to believe that if such a person can be redeemed, then we too are also redeemable. (Short and Short)

Another reason for the popularity of this narrative in sports may be its efficacy in disassociating a skilled athlete with his off-the-field behavior. Athletes like Ben Roethlisberger, Kobe Bryant, and Ray Lewis offer attractive skill sets to their industries and competitive advantages to their teams. Redemption narratives provide the sports industry the opportunity to accommodate their off-the-field transgressions.

One of the prominent advantages of redemption as a political narrative rests on its capacity to explain away past behavior as actions prior to redemption. Lakoff explicitly describes how the redemption narrative applies to George W. Bush:

He had been an alcoholic, had a DUI violation, avoided service in Vietnam, had a shadow experience in his Air National Guard unit, failed repeatedly in business. You might think this would disqualify him for the presidency. But the power of the Redemption narrative turned all of this around for him. In giving up drinking, he redeemed himself in the eyes of all those who live or want to live by the Redemption narrative, who forgave his “youthful indiscretions.” Every failing overcome was a testimony to his character. That is why just stating the facts of his alcoholism, his DUI violation, and his military record had no effect. (35)

Lakoff adequately describes how Bush used the redemption narrative to dismiss negative aspects of his past behavior. Additionally, I believe that the Bush redemption narrative encouraged

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<sup>10</sup> Given the prominence of this narrative structure in sports, Oliver Stone’s use of baseball to frame his George W. Bush film *W.* seems quite appropriate.

viewers and voters to bind his story with others that share the deep redemption narrative. The links between the narratives would confer onto George W. Bush the post-conversion virtues associated with the other protagonists and bind Bush's actions to the morally good or successful actions of the redeemed protagonists.

#### **4.1 GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE PAULINE REDEMPTION NARRATIVE**

The Bush redemption narrative activated subconscious emotional links between Bush's story and other redemption stories. Yet the Bush redemption narrative also appealed consciously to a segment of the population keenly aware of a particular brand of conversion story. It has been widely noted that George W. Bush had special appeal to the large portion of eligible American voters that describe themselves as evangelical Christians. Noting that this portion of the voting population has become an increasingly significant voting bloc over the past three to five decades, political scientists David C. Lege and Kenneth D. Wald explain Bush's appeal:

George W. Bush is himself a model for this prodigal generation and has lost no opportunity to present himself to voters using these symbols. Evangelicals practice a *conversionist* theology (with an emphasis on a personal act of will to accept Christ in into their lives), study the Bible for authoritative statements about how to live, witness to others, and in the face of national threat have reasserted "chosen nation" doctrine to justify the "war on terrorism," which translates as the war against Muslim extremists. Many evangelicals see Bush not only as "one of us" but as God's chosen vessel for these times of trial before the second coming of Christ to rule the earth (Rich 2004). Their changing demographic profile and their syncretistic beliefs, which merge Christianity and American patriotism, left them far more mobilizable than evangelicals had been earlier in the nineteenth century, when politics was an evil to be shunned. (302)

The Bush redemption narrative not only had special appeal to this kind of voters, but certain aspects of the narrative were developed for them in particular.

In his examination of Bush's campaign autobiography, "Enacting Transformation: George W. Bush and the Pauline Conversion Narrative in *A Charge to Keep*" (2008), David C. Bailey describes precisely how the Bush redemption narrative was fashioned not only to explain away the past behavior, but specifically to serve, "as narrative evidence of a divine commission upon his life that would ultimately culminate in his election to the presidency" (216). For these voters, this latter purpose explicitly linked Bush's personal experience with theirs and his political success with the will of God.

Bailey argues that Bush's conversion story conformed to what he calls a "Pauline conversion narrative," rooted in the story of the Christian Saint Paul. He explains:

The New Testament book of Acts contains three accounts of the Apostle Paul's conversion to Christianity, all of which essentially share a common narrative structure. Saul of Tarsus was a devout Jew and staunch enemy of the first-century Christian church. Eager to quash what he saw as a dangerous upstart sect of Judaism, Saul went from city to city arresting any Christians he could find. On his way to Damascus, the writer of Acts tells us, he encountered a bright light and heard the voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). All three of the accounts agree that he was struck blind and led into Damascus, where he eventually regained his sight and ultimately took on a new life mission. After this encounter he began to refer to himself as "Paul" (a name he had used as a Roman citizen prior to his conversion) and became a Christian missionary to the gentiles... Whether his name change was a milestone of newly found faith or simply a useful tool for carrying his gospel message across the Roman world of the first century, Paul's dramatic conversion account eventually became "embedded in Christian consciousness" as what Kenneth Burke would call a "representative anecdote" of Christian conversions. (217-218)

To the extent that this narrative structure continues to serve as a representative anecdote for Christian conversions, it functions as a deep narrative for portions of the Christian community. However, because the story is explicitly discussed as a conversion model within evangelical Christian discourse, the characteristic links between the Pauline narrative and individual redemption stories are explicitly recognized by evangelical voters. Accordingly, Bush's

redemption story was customized in structure and terminology to conform to the evangelical Pauline redemption model.

In addition to its effectiveness in appealing to the two groups independently, the Bush redemption narrative may have also enabled Bush to maximize support among evangelicals without lessening his appeal among the sizable portion of the voting public skeptical of presidential candidates considered to be too religious. It seems obvious that religious values have been an important aspect of presidential character testimony. Likewise, the lack of religion or having the wrong religion can undermine a candidate's worthiness to hold the office. For example, in the election of 1800, supporters of John Adams accused Thomas Jefferson of being an atheist interested in destroying religion (Milkis 87). Al Smith's Catholicism may have contributed to his loss in 1928. More recently, Barack Obama's detractors have long accused him of secretly being a Muslim. In fact, at least a significant minority of Americans continue to believe that he is a Muslim, despite his repeated attestations and overt displays of his Christianity (pewforum.org).

Candidates, however, cannot merely flaunt their Protestant credentials and easily conform to the character requirements for the office. According to survey of registered voters taken in 2000, 50 per cent of Bush's potential supporters either "mostly" or "completely" agreed with the following statement: "It makes me uncomfortable when politicians talk about how religious they are" (pewforum.org). Thus, for all the obvious examples where presidents and presidential candidates openly attest to their religious faiths, careful display is critical since Americans seem to want religious, but not *too religious*, presidents. By customizing the Bush redemption narrative to fit the Pauline model, the strategy not only offered appeal for the broad range of American voters primed to for deep redemption narratives in general, it also provided a means

for Bush to testify as a bona fide evangelical without risking support among voters uncomfortable with candidates that talk openly about how religious they are.

Bailey draws from theological and rhetorical studies to identify three phases of the Pauline redemption narrative. These are: transgression, transformation, and commissioning. This structure broadly parallels the standard plot trajectory of other redemption narratives. However, in each of these phases, the Pauline redemption narrative incorporates particular characteristics. In the *transgression* phase, the protagonist sins against the good, especially through illicit sexuality, violence, substance abuse, or gambling. As Bailey puts it, the protagonist is “utterly lost in sin and rebellion—an object of pity and wretched depravity” (218). In the *transformation* phase, the protagonist experiences a spectacular moment of clarity that reveals his wrongdoing. Bailey notes that this moment of transformation is usually sudden and accompanies an existential crisis. The final phase is the *commissioning* phase, as Bailey describes it: “At its core, the commissioning phase involves the protagonist’s description of purpose and renewed mission that he or she accepts as a result of the conversion experience” (220). Bush’s redemption narrative carefully reflected these phases.

Bush’s transgression phase clearly focuses on his excessive use of alcohol. While the Bush campaign and administration revealed few specifics regarding this phase, what was revealed conformed to the accepted parameters of the Pauline narrative. Therefore, when Bush’s previous drunk driving arrest was revealed just prior to the 2000 election, the offense reflected a typical aspect of transgression.

Bailey explains how the history of Bush’s transformation phase has been rhetorically constructed to make it seem like his conversion took on the attributes of the Pauline transformation. For example, Bush’s campaign autobiography, like *Decision Points*, highlights

his impromptu decision to quit drinking based on an epiphany during his daily jog (Bailey 225, *Decision Points 2*).

Finally, and most importantly, Bailey argues that the central idea of the Bush Pauline redemption narrative was “that Bush viewed public office as a divine charge or calling—one that he stood ready to undertake.” (224) This final aspect of Bush’s narrative, according to Bailey’s analysis, made it more likely that the large segment of the population that viewed themselves as evangelicals, would vote for him and support his actions as president (233). Since the Pauline redemption narrative serves as the model for each of their individual lives, and to the extent that they, as individuals, believe that their transformations charge them with fulfilling divine destiny, they identify George W. Bush as the political actor charged with fulfilling God’s will on a national level.

Especially by incorporating this final, commissioning phase to the Bush redemption narrative, the campaign and administration appealed directly to this population of voters, familiar with the Pauline redemption narrative, the representative anecdote for Christian conversion. Yet Bush’s adaptation of the Pauline narrative was compatible within the general framework of a broader set of redemption narratives. Therefore, the Bush redemption narrative offered political utility both for the “born again” segment of the population and for the group of voters and citizens less familiar with the Pauline redemption narrative, but receptive to other deep redemption narratives.

## **4.2 GEORGE W. BUSH'S PERFORMANCE OF THE REDEMPTION NARRATIVE**

George W. Bush performed the redemption narrative through narration, ritual, and patterns of behavior. Because George W. Bush's redemption narrative incorporated elements clearly intended to link his story to "born again" voters who would recognize it as their own, his performance reflected the links between his own story and the Pauline redemption narrative. These kinds of performances constituted a coherent narrative strategy that encouraged viewers and voters to dismiss negative aspects of his past, confer particular virtues onto Bush, and associate his actions within a context of the moral good. In this section, I address some examples of the performances that supported the redemption narrative by considering each of the three phases of the Pauline narrative.

### **4.2.1 Transgression Phase**

Even though itemizing one's sins is often part of Pauline conversion narratives, George W. Bush was careful not to reveal too much about his past indiscretions during the 2000 presidential campaign. Bush's relegating all of his past sins to the transgression phase of his redemption narrative transformed a potential political liability into a central component of an effective narrative strategy. However, a detailed public confession of the transgression phase of his narrative may have presented Bush with complicated political problems. Long before the 2000 campaign, President Clinton had many times illuminated such pitfalls in trying to explain actions like smoking but not inhaling or engaging in sexual activity but not sexual intercourse. Instead,

Bush addressed his transgression phrase only in broad strokes. So broadly, in fact, that some interpreted his words to include the use of narcotics like cocaine.

Bush faced the difficult task of foregrounding his transgression phase as a critical aspect of his redemption story while protecting himself from being held accountable for such behaviors. I submit that Bush manipulated the news media in order to highlight his transgression phase while simultaneously hiding his particular transgressions.

In a 1999 feature article in the *New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof reports that some members of the entertainment media speculated inaccurately about which rumored transgressions were factual:

There is a popular image of Mr. Bush's younger days, fueled by late-night television jokes, suggesting that he spent much of the 1970's stupefied in a drug-fueled haze. But Mr. Bush's elliptical comments suggesting that he used drugs before 1974 may have led people to think that he was wilder than he really was, and the fuller portrait of him in the 1970's and early 1980's indicates that his behavior was more callow than criminal. Many of his friends say that by the standards of his time he was pretty strait-laced. (A8)

The consequence of such speculation regarding these transgressions might have proved problematic for another candidate. For Bush, however, the entertainment media speculation regarding his past might have prompted reporters like Kristof to diminish their validity:

Mr. Bush redeemed himself and is today very much a product of that redemption. On the campaign trail, it lends him an air of authenticity, allowing him to come across as a decent man today without the baggage of having always been a squeaky-clean, apple-polishing mama's boy. (A8)

Rather than detailing, or narrating, his transgression phase, Bush let others imagine it in the context of his current behavior.

For news reporters like Kristof and many others, Bush's fondness for broad humor and his distaste of sophistication may have encouraged assumptions about a relatively benign transgression phase. In his first-hand account of Bush's campaign and early presidency *Ambling*

*into History: The Unlikely Odyssey of George W. Bush* (2002), reporter Frank Bruni offers several examples of Bush's childish behavior with his press detail during the campaign in 2000:

Before an outdoor speech in the Southern California desert, Bush pledged to keep his remarks brief, in deference to one of the heat's less attractive effects on the human body. He tugged on the portion of his dress shirt covering his underarms and explained, "Pit City," a place we would later come to gaze upon during that parade. He glanced in horror at the slivers of sushi that we had been served during one flight and held his peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich high like a chalice. "This is heaven, right here," he proclaimed. Much of the time, he greedily consumed bilious orange Fritos or Cheez Doodles, stacked high in clear plastic cups, and paid verbal homage to the joys of hamburgers and tacos. When he ate French fries, he dipped them into puddles of ketchup deeper and broader than anyone over the age of twelve typically amasses. (187-188)

Bush behaved this way for the benefit of the very media reporters that might try to fill in the details of his transgression phase. Perhaps his immaturity might foster a sense that Bush's transgressions were likely the kind universal in adolescence. Alternatively, maybe Bush was suggesting that he could never be so sophisticated as to do anything particularly diabolical. Either way, Bush allowed the media to imagine the details of his transgressions. For those that would have only tolerated juvenile and benign transgressions, the media might suggest that his transgressions were merely those. For those who believed that profound transgressions prefigured profound transformation, his omission of fact allowed for that, too.

#### **4.2.2 Transformation Phase**

Early in the 2000 presidential primary campaign, George W. Bush foregrounded the transformation phase of his redemption narrative. In a December 1999 Republican debate prior to the Iowa caucuses, George W. Bush surprised his audience when he responded to a question about which political philosopher he identified with and why. The moment between the governor and mediator John Bachman was recalled by Bush's religious biographer in 2004:

“Christ,” said Bush without hesitation, “because he changed my heart.”

There was a moment of almost shocked silence. Bachman realizing that there needed to be a follow-up, turned back to Bush. “I think the viewers would like to know more on how he’s changed your heart,” he added.

“Well, if you don’t know,” Bush rejoined, “it’s going to be hard to explain.” His face took on an expression close to a smirk when he said this, irritating some observers who didn’t like the remark in the first place.

But Bachman later said he had not interpreted this as a “you-dummy” response: “I was still caught unprepared because it [the answer] was so brief,” Bachman explained. In his follow-up, Bush elaborated, “When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that’s what happened to me.” (Aikman 4)

Bush had taken that opportunity to control the story of his transformation.

In his post-presidential memoir, *Decision Points* (2010), George W. Bush recalled that following the debate he spoke with his parents on the phone. They told him that they thought the answer would not hurt him too badly (*Decision Points* 71). Assuming the accuracy of that anecdote, perhaps the older Bushes did not understand the significance of the Bush redemption narrative.

Historian Kevin M. Kruse points out that the comment made perfect sense for “born-again” voters. He quotes a Southern Baptist official as saying: “Most evangelicals who heard that question probably thought, ‘That’s exactly the way I would have answered’” (Zelizer, *Presidency* 230). Bush’s carefully chosen words narrated his conversion moment to conform with the Pauline narrative as recognizable to evangelical Christians.

### **4.2.3 Commissioning Phase**

That his presidency was an assignment from God reflected the essential premise of the commissioning phase of Bush’s redemption narrative. Despite the criticism such a notion prompted from the left, Bush consistently linked his election and execution of office to a divine

mission. In his 2001 inaugural address, Bush linked the ritual of his becoming the president to the commissioning phase of the Pauline redemption narrative. Near the end of the speech, Bush announced:

We are not this story's author, who fills time and eternity with his purpose. Yet his purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another. Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose today, to make our country more just and generous, to affirm the dignity of our lives and every life. This work continues. This story goes on. (presidentialrhetoric.com)

Like Paul, Bush rhetorically surrenders his agency follow the will of God.

At the same time, Bush's rhetoric bares the construction of the narrative by likening God to the author of the "story." He casts himself and his audience as characters serving this author's end. For many in his intended audience, drawing conscious attention to the narrative construction is advantageous, not detrimental, since it draws parallels between Bush and others who accept God's will.

Of course, George W. Bush's performance of the commissioning phase was most prominent in terms of the response to the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq. I will address these performances more extensively in chapter 5 of this dissertation in the context of the Bush rescue narrative.

### **4.3 RESPONSES TO THE REDEMPTION NARRATIVE**

The 2000 Gore campaign presented a clear example of ineffective political response to the George W. Bush redemption narrative. Again, multiple reasons might account for the failures. First, as Lakoff points out, the redemption narrative can transform a candidate's previous sins

from liabilities to strengths. Therefore, speculation, or even revelation, regarding Bush's past indiscretions may have only contributed to the effectiveness of the redemption narrative (35).<sup>11</sup> Second, because progressive political institutions largely rely on the principle that rational persuasion is the best means to win elections, politicians dependent upon those institutions are generally disinclined to object directly to whatever personal narrative the opposition puts forward. Accordingly, the Gore team tried to "focus on the issues" and avoid questioning the authenticity (or even relevance) of Bush's personal or religious conversion or addressing the deeper issue of the construction of a narrative instead of an argument. The Gore campaign did not present a compelling personal narrative for its candidate that could compete with or be contrasted to the Bush redemption narrative. In order to illustrate these points, I will reference two events in the 2000 presidential campaign: the second presidential debate and the Democratic National Convention.

The second debate between presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore occurred on October 11, 2000 at Wake Forest University at Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The format of the debate, as moderator Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) put it, was "that of a conversation" (debates.org). In accordance with that notion, the candidates sat across from one another at a table with Lehrer. The informality allowed the candidates to ask questions of each other, and Lehrer to ask follow-up or alternative questions. During one such exchange, the limited effectiveness of Gore's relying on rational choice and ignoring narrative strategy is particularly clear.

In response to a question from Lehrer regarding the large number of Americans without health insurance, Gore and Bush debated over a series of statistics. Bush offered statistics that

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<sup>11</sup> Since the Bush campaign seemed to be referring to Clinton's past indiscretions throughout the election (in support of the dynasty narrative), the Gore campaign must have found Bush's resilience particularly frustrating.

demonstrated his health policy success in Texas while Gore repeatedly cited statistics meant to highlight the ineffectiveness of Bush's previous policy decisions. Gore offered:

There are 1.4 million children in Texas who do not have health insurance. 600,000 of whom, and maybe some of those have since gotten it, but as of a year ago 600,000 of them were actually eligible for it but they couldn't sign up for it because of the barriers that they [Bush's gubernatorial administration] had set up.

In response, George W. Bush pivoted from arguing statistics and tried to make the issue about the moral character of the candidates:

If he's trying to allege that I'm a hard-hearted person and I don't care about children, he's absolutely wrong...

After Bush offered some other numbers intended to bolster his good-heartedness, Lehrer turned back to Gore:

Let me put that directly to you, Vice President Gore. The reason you brought this up, is it – are you suggesting that those numbers and that record will reflect the way Governor Bush will operate in this area of health insurance as president?

Gore responded by making it clear that he was not questioning Bush's character at all:

Yes, yes. But it's not a statement about his heart. I don't claim to know his heart. I think he's a good person. I make no allegations about that. I believe him when he says that he has a good heart. I know enough about your story to admire a lot of the things that you have done as a person. But I think it's about his priorities. And let me tell you exactly why I think that the choice he made to give a tax cut for the oil companies and others before addressing this -- I mean, if you were the governor of a state that was dead last in health care for families, and all of a sudden you found yourself with the biggest surplus your state had ever had in its history, wouldn't you want to maybe use some of it to climb from 50th to, say, 45 or 40 or something or maybe better? I would.

Given the opportunity to question or replace the attributes of character bestowed upon Bush by the dynasty and redemption narratives, Gore, instead validated Bush's moral attributes and acknowledged and emphasized Bush's "admirable" personal story. In doing so, Gore not only lost the opportunity to resist the Bush redemption narrative, he explicitly supported it.

The 2000 Democratic National Convention offers another useful example of the left's ineffectiveness in resisting the Bush narrative strategies. Presumably in order to contrast Al Gore with Bill Clinton, Gore's relationship with his wife, Tipper, was foregrounded. While the biographical video that introduced Gore at the convention incorporated information regarding Gore's father (a U.S. Senator with potentially interesting stories) and his military record (during Vietnam), it was narrated primarily by Tipper and framed by their decades-long marriage. The passionate kiss between them on the convention stage may be the most memorable image of the event. The focus on the Gore marriage may have been intended to present the candidate as a dedicated "family man," but there was little in the Gore video that resembled other compelling or coherent stories about men dedicated to their families. Instead, the video and the event appeared to be constructed primarily in order to convince the viewing public that the Gores were truly in love and, presumably, that a President Gore would not repeat Clinton's personal misbehavior. As I addressed in chapter 3, Gore's transparent efforts to distance himself from Clinton may have lent credibility to the Bush dynasty narrative. Additionally, such efforts did not seem to be made within the context of any recognizable strategy to tell a compelling story about Gore's identity that would possibly compete with Bush's "admirable" story of personal redemption.

Unlike the Gore campaign, three of the four subject plays acknowledge and respond directly to aspects of the Bush redemption narrative. In order to examine the central hypothesis of this dissertation, this section focuses on aspects of the plays that expose, reject, or replace elements of the Bush redemption narrative.

### 4.3.1 *The Passion of George W. Bush*

As addressed in chapter 3, *The Passion of George W. Bush* (2004) explicitly layers a version of George W. Bush onto the central Christian narrative by substituting George W. Bush for Jesus Christ. The musical's title evokes the contemporary Mel Gibson film that dramatizes Christ's suffering and death, while the irreverent approach to the subject matter resembles *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979). The opening prelude prophesizes Bush's coming as the Bible does with Jesus Christ. The narrative is resolved through a fantastic reversal that resembles the resurrection of Jesus. However, playwrights Adam B. Mathias and John Herin incorporate a redemption narrative within the overall framing structure that mimics and exposes the Pauline conversion characteristics of the Bush redemption narrative. In the dramatic conclusion of the play, that redemption narrative is ultimately rejected and replaced.

After initially appearing as a child, George W. Bush appears early in the play as an adult unable to live up to the lofty expectations of the Bush dynasty. This scene initiates the play's redemption story, an internal narrative that adheres to the Pauline conversion. The scene opens with George H.W. Bush, as vice-president, in conversation with Dick Cheney. In discussing his oldest son, the vice-president says:

Too bad he's not as successful as his old man was. Fortunately, I've got three other sons.  
(8).

Hearing this, George W. Bush promptly suffers an acute existential crisis, a typical requisite for the moment of clarity that marks the transformation phase of Pauline redemption narratives. The character proceeds into a musical soliloquy that establishes the three phases of the Pauline structure:

The road to hell is lined with losers,

And I'm a loser of the first degree.  
How can I ever get into heaven?  
How can I be like a Bush should be?  
(*to God*)  
My life is a mess.  
My life is a mess, Lord. (9)

Having confirmed the character's existential crisis, the song pivots to establish his behavior within the initial, transgression phase of the narrative:

My nights are filled with drinking.  
By day, I watch my business sinking.  
All I've known is failure.  
I desperately need some success. (9)

And:

I'm going to waste.  
I'm going to waste, Lord.  
My life's a big disaster.  
I'm running fast, but evil's faster.  
Start this story over  
With all of the bad parts erased. (9)

Looking for help from God, Bush continues to plead for transformation:

Show me the way, Lord.  
I'll fix my mistakes.  
I'm ready to change, Lord.  
I'll do what it takes.  
Give me a little push.  
I'll be a better Bush.  
Come and show me the way. (10)

Implicitly following the Pauline redemption narrative, this stage version of George W. Bush asks for the commissioning phase of his story.

Dick Cheney, "bathed in an eerie, smoky glow" hears this plea and recognizes it as his opportunity to take control over the naïve Bush (10). In order to counterfeit the fantastic transformation, Cheney impersonates the narrative's deity in order to transform and commission Bush for Cheney's own work. In the ensuing scene, Cheney delegates day-to-day control over

Bush to his minion, Karl Rove. The significance of the transformation is emphasized theatrically by the inclusion of a musical burlesque of training montages in popular film versions of redemptions stories like the *Rocky* series (18-19).

After George W. Bush is transformed into an effective vessel for Cheney's missions, he runs for president to fulfill his dynastic destiny. In order to ensure his victory, of course, he must win the close election in Florida, where his brother Jeb is governor. Their mother, Barbara, demands that Jeb certify the election results before all the votes can be counted so that George W. is sure to win. Jeb refuses at first since he is resentful that his brother has achieved the success and favor that he believes should rightfully be his since he has always worked hard and followed the rules. According to Jeb, George W. is intellectually inferior, an alcoholic, and barely literate. In order to convince her responsible son to help his brother, Barbara sings the story of the Prodigal Son:

A certain man has two fine spawn;  
One stayed close and one went yon,  
Wasting his substance with riotous living. Riotous living!  
And soon he finds his money spent,  
Lost and cold, he doth lament  
“Who can I turn to? Oh, where shall I go now? Where shall I go now?”  
“I will arise—Arise!—and to my father return,  
And fall on my knees saying: Forgive me! Forgive!”  
So ran he home in haste  
And with his father embraced  
And soon a great feast had begun  
To welcome the prodigal son!  
But asks the son who stayed behind,  
“Who is hailed while I'm maligned?”  
“Your brother's returned and your father's rejoicing! All are rejoicing!”  
“But what of me? Am I but chaff?  
For me they slay no fatted calf!”  
Then spoke the father while beating him soundly—ever so soundly:  
He was dead and is alive!  
He was lost and is found!  
He was drunk and is sober!  
He is your brother and your blood!

You must Arise—Arise!—and to your brother return,  
And fall to your knees and forgive! Forgive!  
Yes, yes, arise! Unbend!  
And to your brother attend!  
Trust that your father is wise.  
Fall on your knees and arise! (26-27)

The full re-telling of this story at this point in the play emphasizes the links between the Bush redemption narrative and the story of the prodigal son. Like Jeb, voters and viewers are called to forgive Bush's previous transgressions because he has been transformed.

Nonetheless, Jeb is not fully convinced by this story, and his skepticism is borne out, since within the play the transformation is false and only the result of Cheney's manipulations. Therefore, the dramatic resolution of the play's narrative requires the unraveling of Cheney's plots, and the genuine transformation of George W. Bush.

This resolution is prompted by Bush himself finding evidence that Cheney has been lying to the American public. This leads him to recognize that Cheney has also been manipulating him and pretending to be God. Ultimately, Bush understands that his presidency has been commissioned for evil and instead of accepting the 2004 nomination for re-election, Bush promptly resigns from office. This fantastic reversal resolves the problem of Bush's fabricated redemption as well as his failure to live up to his dynastic destiny.

At the end of the musical, Bush reprises his earlier plea for divine guidance:  
Show me the way, Lord.  
I'm lost and alone.  
I need to be told, Lord,  
I need to be shown.

But at the play's conclusion, he considers another option – outside of the Pauline redemption narrative:

Or should I now begin  
To trust the voice within?  
Lord, I'll find my own way. (68)

Concluding that he cannot look for divine commissioning, Bush's actual redemption can only be accomplished by internal reflection and redeeming action. This ending rejects the Bush redemption narrative by denying the divine role in the dramatic resolution of the narrative. Instead of relying on divine transformation for salvation and divine commissioning for doing good, the play's George W. Bush learns that he must rely on conscience and ethical action for true redemption.

#### ***4.3.2 When We Go Upon the Sea***

In *When We Go Upon the Sea* (2010), Lee Blessing presents a rendering of George W. Bush that exposes and rejects the ascendant culmination of the Bush redemption narrative by dramatizing a hypothetical future whereby, following the commissioning phase of his redemption, "George" invalidates his redemption and returns to his transgressive behaviors.

The play supposes that the former American president has been charged with international crimes based on his invasion of Iraq and is to be tried at The Hague. In this hypothetical continuation of the redemption narrative, Bush suffers criminal prosecution and unpopularity as a result of accepting the mission he claimed as divine. The play imagines the evening before the trial is set to begin. There, the hypothetical George W. Bush relapses, returns to his transgressions, and indulges in a progressive series of vices, like bourbon, cocaine, and extramarital sex provided by a hotel concierge named Piet and a woman named Anna-Lisa (whom George and the audience eventually discover to be Piet's wife). Within the first few minutes of the play, Blessing establishes these transgressions when George makes a request for liquor that surprises both the audience and Piet:

PIET: Would you like something to drink? We have water, soft drinks, all sorts of juices—

GEORGE: Bourbon?

PIET: Sorry?

GEORGE: Do you have any bourbon. Bourbon whiskey.

PIET: Are you serious? (4)

George explains that he only recently started drinking again, and actually reaffirms the validity of his previous transformation: “I never went through treatment. For alcohol, I mean. Just quit. Got Jesus in my heart and quit the stuff. Proudest moment of my life” (14).

As envisioned on the stage, this moment reveals a version of Bush whose transformation was authentic but ephemeral. Personally shattered by international unpopularity and prosecution, the character’s relapse seems prompted by his feeling that he has been betrayed.

Later in the scene, he expresses that to Piet:

For eight years, I protected Europe from wholesale terrorist attack. What do you give me in return? A trial. I fucking hate the Dutch. (16)

As the play continues, George continues to drink bourbon, then snorts cocaine, and eventually has sex with Anna-Lisa. These moral transgressions prompt him to be increasingly more candid regarding his sense of betrayal by not only the world, but by America in particular:

They are blaming me. And it’s not fair. I never did a thing without the support of the American people. You know how I know that? ‘Cause no matter how far I sank in the polls, no matter how low that number went, they never, never came to get me. They can whine all they want about how much they objected, and how they never wanted to go into Iraq and all the rest of that shit. But bottom line, where were the demonstrations? The riots? Students lying dead in their own blood? There weren’t any. Not to speak of. Everyone bitched that I wasn’t elected the first time, that I was the worst President in history—but did a million of ‘em march on the White House? No. They marched right back in the voting booth and elected me again. At the low point of the war. The low point! Know what I saw when I looked out the Oval Office? An endless circle of clowns—every one of ‘em pointing at the next guy. “You get him to stop. No, you do it.” Nobody got me to stop; they just sat around playing video games, blowing up terrorists on the living-room couch. (59)

This monologue may seem targeted at the play's audience, and Blessing likely intends to prompt consideration of democratic complicity. Yet though the playwright may broaden blame, he is careful not to free Bush of individual responsibility, despite the character's obvious desire for exoneration. Looking for such absolution in conversation with Piet, George repeatedly asks whether the concierge agrees with his assertion that the American public is culpable for his execution of the war. Piet consistently evades responding to such pleas by making jokes or offering other distractions. Piet may be tasked with providing George material comfort, but he does not give comfort to his conscience.

At the end of the play, George is preparing to depart for the start of the trial. In leaving Piet and Anna-Lisa, he offers to give them some money for their troubles:

GEORGE: I have something for you.

PIET: It's not necessary.

GEORGE: Why not?

PIET: It was our honor.

GEORGE: It's just money.

PIET: No, please. I must insist. We do these things for entirely altruistic reasons.

GEORGE: Helping others, eh?

PIET: An act of faith, if you like.

GEORGE: Religious?

PIET: No, no. An act of good faith. That's all.

GEORGE: Faithful servant.

PIET: Exactly. (78-79)

In that exchange, Piet explains *their* mission, *their* commissioning. This stands in direct contrast to the status of George's own mission. Because his commissioning led to his prosecution, he ultimately rejected it and invalidated his redemption. *When We Go Upon the Sea*, then, alters the trajectory of the Bush redemption narrative. Instead of an ascending narrative whereby redemption from transgression is initiated by transformation and fulfilled by commissioning, Bush's redemption story is ultimately a circular failure. He transgressed, he is transformed, he is commissioned, but he retreats to transgression. Unlike other Christian redemption stories, Bush

cannot hold the faith when it is tested. Paul's commissioning phase, for example, also culminates in arrest and prosecution, and, keeping the faith, he is ultimately martyred. In this play, George ultimately rejects his commission, nullifies his transformation and returns to his transgressions.

The play's response to the Bush redemption narrative is not only retrospective, but it also relies on a hypothetical construction where Bush is legally held to account for his invasion of Iraq. Within the framework of that hypothetical, Bush's worthiness for redemption is challenged, especially in contrast with Pauline redemption. Like *The Passion of George W. Bush*, the play presents a narrative premised on the validity of Christian ideals but rejects Bush's ability to live up to them. In the earlier play (as discussed in chapter 3), George W. Bush needs to reverse his policies in order to fulfill Christian ideals as understood by the Jesus story bound to the dynasty narrative. In Blessing's play, George's completion of the Pauline redemption is tested by his willingness to accept his prosecution. By reverting to his transgressions and trying to shift blame to the American people instead of playing the good Christian martyr and defending the merits of the war (as his commissioning), George's redemption is ultimately undone. George tosses his transformation aside once its political effectiveness fails.

By casting doubt on the authenticity of Bush's personal transformation the play offers a critical perspective on George W. Bush for posterity's sake. If it exposes the Bush redemption narrative, it can only do so retrospectively. Furthermore, in order to arrive at that conclusion the play implicitly accepts the value of the redemption narrative as testimony for presidential character. Therefore, the potential effectiveness of the play as a response to the Bush strategy might be best understood as contained within the redemption narrative framework crucial to the Bush strategy.

### **4.3.3 *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush***

For the most part, Will Ferrell's *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush* responds to the Bush redemption narrative through broad mockery, as one might expect.

However, this broad mockery exposes certain elements of the redemption narrative and calls its validity into question.

The play operates under the conceit that George W. Bush has been brought, by helicopter, to a New York theatre in order to remember and celebrate his two terms as president with the audience. The premise prompts laughter in part because the New York theatre audience is unlikely to find much to celebrate about the Bush presidency, other than its ending.

Addressing the audience early, Ferrell's Bush states:

When the pilots of Marine One said they were going to drop me off in New York City, I thought they were joking. I said, "Sure, you know while you're at it, why don't you drop me off in the faggy theatre district." Hey, guess what? They did, so the joke's on me.

This exchange emphasizes the fanciful conceit of the performance as deliberately ironic.

Once the informal opening monologue is finished, Ferrell's Bush pivots to the more formal elements of the celebration. Three projection screens that serve as the set's backdrop display a Christian cross, flanked on each side by the elephant symbol of the Republican Party. Based at least on the response of the audience recorded for the HBO broadcast of the performance, the overt linkage of political and religious branding prompts significant laughter. Presumably, some of the humor of the display derives from the blatant exhibition of the strategic links between religion and politics that the audience recognizes. However, Ferrell's Bush ignores the audience response and bows his head and asks the audience to pray with him. This prompts additional laughter.

The beginning of the prayer humorously reflects the degree to which Bush's overt display of religion is meant to endear him to particular members of the viewing electorate and not others:

Dear Lord Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ I'm referring to blond good-looking lightly bearded or clean-shaven Jesus Christ. Not hippie looking Jesus or swarthy more Middle-Eastern looking Jesus who's probably more historically accurate – not that guy. So -- dear clean shaven or lightly bearded like Mike Piazza-Jesus, we give thanks to you for everything you do.

The humorous Aryan-izing of Jesus lampoons both the European-Christian traditional imagining of the historical Jesus and Bush's attempts to pander to the reactionary Christians that maintain such traditions.

The humor of this display is magnified when Ferrell's Bush prays to Jesus on behalf of the audience, and quickly ends the prayer by claiming that by participating in it all those in the audience are pledging to accept "Jesus Christ as their savior" regardless of their actual religious beliefs. This "trick" pokes fun at the brand of Christian mysticism also inherent in the transformation phase of Bush's redemption narrative. The Bush redemption narrative rests on the possibility that sudden divine redemption can occur. In this performance, the possibility of such an event taking place is the punch line for a joke.

After completing his sneaky prayer, Ferrell's Bush returns to informal audience address and confides:

After 8 years this crazy ride is over. Can I be honest with you? I feel as free as balls in boxers. Yeah...I can now do anything I want. Hell I might even have a beer tonight. Or better yet, smoke a joint.

This confession posits that the end of his presidency means that Bush can return to the behaviors that comprised the transgression phase of his redemption narrative. This aspect of Ferrell's performance resembles Blessing's perspective on Bush's transgressions in *When We Go Upon the Sea*, even though it is significantly less nuanced and more succinctly communicated. Both

plays contend that the payoffs of Bush's alcohol abstinence were in political efficacy, whether or not the transformation was genuine or illusory.

Like *The Passion of George W. Bush*, Ferrell's performance also draws attention to the contradictions between Bush's policy decisions and ostensible Christian values. Addressing his time as governor, Ferrell's Bush brags about three major accomplishments. Each is, of course, unlikely to impress the play's likely audience. The first two encourage guns and violence:

As governor, my highlights included reinstating a bill that allowed for citizens to carry concealed weapons into churches, nursing homes, and amusement parks.

And:

There are more executions in my state than any other state in the union.

The character then completes this trinity of accomplishments with a final one:

And on June 10th, 2000 I proclaimed it to be "Jesus Day" in Texas. Now how many other states had a "Jesus Day"? I'll tell you: none.

Like the first two items in his list, this final item is ironic because Ferrell trumpets as an accomplishment an action the theatrical audience likely views negatively. However, the humor of the moment also derives from the ironic juxtaposition between the violence inherent in the first two and the supposed embrace of Christian values in the last. The joke ultimately rejects the validity of the commissioning phase of Bush's redemption narrative by contrasting guns and execution with Jesus.

At the very end of the performance, Ferrell's Bush looks at the audience and says, "You're welcome, America." As promised, he proceeds to grab a can of Budweiser and has a seat. The presidency over, George W. Bush can drop the pretense of his redemption and again enjoy his transgression. The audience, too, is free to celebrate the end of the presidency.

#### 4.2.4 *The Daily Show and The Colbert Report*

In September of 2000, Jon Stewart reported on daytime talk show host Oprah Winfrey's interview with George W. Bush. Bush's appearance on Winfrey's program, not generally considered to be part of the news media or generally political in nature, exemplifies the significance of personal storytelling through such media in contemporary presidential campaigns. Like Bill Clinton's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* eight years earlier, (addressed in chapter 2 of this dissertation), Bush's appearance on *Oprah* was intended to promote his candidacy among a viewing demographic that may not normally consume political news. Moreover, the appearance also served Bush's personal narratives – particularly the redemption narrative. Just as *The Arsenio Hall Show* offered Clinton a perfect venue for validating his identity as a “man of the people,” *Oprah* offered Bush an ideal format for telling his personal story of redemption.

Stewart's framing of that interview on September 20, 2000 questions the authenticity of that personal story and sheds light on the complicity of television media (even beyond the traditional “news media”) in presidential communication strategies. After reporting that Bush was visiting Oprah, Stewart narrated the event over video footage of Bush's appearance:

A confident Bush entered the studio to a rousing ovation. It was the kind of cheer he used to get when returning to the Frat House with a case a beer under one arm and something he called the Washington “bong-u-ment” under the other. ....

By introducing Bush in the context of his past, Stewart illuminates the strategic purpose of the interview. By poking fun at Bush's transgressive past by making it seem ordinary (a case of beer at a frat house) and silly (the pun-named paraphernalia), Stewart undermines the validity of Bush's story. He continues his report by making Bush's confession seem insincere by cutting

the video clips to make it seem like Bush walked onto Oprah's set and immediately confessed to his alcoholism. He narrates:

Oprah asked Bush how he was doing.

Then cuts to a clip from Bush:

Alcohol was beginning to compete with my affections. Compete with my affections for my wife and my family.

Stewart responds to the clip by staring at his audience with a deadpan reaction:

Okay, I'm fine too.

That Stewart truncated the interview's beginning is evident, but the humor is generated by literally distilling the event to its strategic purpose. Stewart then proceeds by explicitly rejecting the relevance of such personal revelations and mock-searching for insightful or even relevant questions. He continues:

But Oprah didn't pull any punches with the candidate. She throttled the Texas governor with questions like "what is the best gift you've ever given?"

In this brief report, Stewart successfully questions the authenticity and relevance of the interview, and, in turn, Bush's redemption story. Through his "fake" reporting, Stewart implies that Bush's transgression phase was trivial, his transformation insincere and irrelevant to his potential presidency, and communicated through complicit media.

Jon Stewart's reporting about the presidential debates in 2000 also reflects his response to the Bush redemption narrative, the media's complicity in its telling, and the Gore campaign's ineffective resistance to it. Reporting on the first debate between Bush and Gore, Stewart plays a clip of Bush saying:

I enjoyed that debate because it gave me a chance. Gave Americans from all walks of life a chance to see us directly, didn't have to go through some filter in order to share our philosophies. (thedailyshow.com)

Here again, Bush's choice of the word "philosophies" reflects a kind of coded communication to evangelical voters who appreciated his earlier citation of Jesus Christ as the most influential philosopher on his thinking. Stewart recognizes this and, bemoaning the control of the campaigns and media on the debates' formats and questions, deadpans a response to Bush:

You know I saw that debate and I think I speak for all Americans when I say: bring back the filter.

On the eve of the third presidential debate, Stewart derided the friendly tone of the second debate by comparing it to a successful second romantic date ([thedailyshow.com](http://thedailyshow.com)).

After showing a clip of Gore complimenting Bush's heart and affirming his belief that Bush is a good person, Stewart then reports "Gore recovered, however, and set his phasers to attack" and then cuts to a clip of Gore reciting statistics regarding access to health insurance in Texas. Stewart's mocking of Gore's performance in that debate also draws attention to the two Gore errors I addressed earlier in this chapter: validating the opponent's personal narratives and relying on rational choice approaches to persuasion.

Stephen Colbert implicitly addresses this latter error in his satiric embrace of his notion of *truthiness*. Colbert introduced the term in October of 2005 during the first edition of his long-standing segment "The Word" (explained in chapter 3 of the dissertation). In his tongue-in-cheek embrace of *truthiness* over truth or fact, Colbert clearly explains what the political institutions of the left seem to misunderstand:

I don't trust books. They're all fact and no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart. Face it, folks, we are divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans or liberals or conservatives or tops and bottoms, no. We are divided between those who *think* with their head and those that *know* with their heart.  
([colbertnation.com](http://colbertnation.com))

Colbert then uses Bush's unpopular and unsuccessful attempt to appoint White House counsel Harriet Miers to Supreme Court earlier in the year as an example of the power of *truthiness*.

Consider Harriet Miers. If you *think* about Harriet Miers, of course her nomination's absurd. But the president didn't say he *thought* about his selection.

Colbert shows a clip of Bush saying:

I know her heart.

In using the word "heart," Bush echoes the language used in his redemption narrative. Colbert faux-embraces this tactic:

Notice how he said nothing about her brain. He didn't have to. He *feels* the truth about Harriet Myers.

Colbert, still in the first episode of his new program, then pivots to apply the same logic to the topic that constituted the greatest criticism of Bush's tenure as president:

And what about Iraq? If you *think* about it, maybe there a few missing pieces to the rationale for war, but doesn't taking Saddam out *feel* like the right thing? Right here, right here in the gut? Truthiness is that anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news at you.

Colbert's illumination of Bush's like-minded approach to selling his personal story and his political decision-making leads directly to criticism of Bush's decision to invade Iraq. Given that the war represents the culmination of both the Bush dynasty and redemption narratives, this should be not surprising. I will return to Stewart and Colbert's response to the War in Iraq in the context of Bush's rescue narrative in chapter 5.

In considering the response of the theatrical plays and the late-night news parodies to the Bush redemption narrative, I conclude that the performances expose the construction of the narrative strategy and question the validity of the narrative. However, as I concluded in chapter 3 in terms of the dynasty narrative, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* illuminate how the media convey the Bush redemption narrative in addition to exposing, rejecting, and replacing the narrative itself. In so doing, they respond to the Bush redemption narrative more

comprehensively than the subject plays. The degree to which these insights might provide tools for broader institutions of the left to respond effectively to the redemption narratives, like Bush's, is unclear. I suggest that Bush's redemption narrative, like the dynasty narrative, was critical in his election and re-election to the presidency. It is evident that Barack Obama's successful candidacy in 2008 was also supported, at least in part, by a compelling personal narrative. While that candidacy is beyond the scope of this analysis, it seems clear that the right has undermined and replaced Obama's personal narrative much more successfully than the left resisted Bush's.

Finally, the left's general failure to undermine or neutralize Bush's redemption narrative must be examined in the context of the longstanding debate regarding the role of religion and American government. In his letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802, Thomas Jefferson devised a metaphor long since used to understand the impact of the first amendment to the U.S. as "building a wall of separation between Church and State" ([loc.gov](http://loc.gov)). Yet over the course of American history, this separation has rarely been absolute. Jefferson himself attended religious services in the U.S. House of Representatives (Neem 140). "In God We Trust" is printed on U.S. currency. Presidents have generally used the Bible during for inaugurations. However, the philosophical rationales for the country's separation from England rest on the rejection of monarchy ordained by God, and religious freedoms such as those established by the first amendment have often been considered as founding principles of American government and central to American exceptionalism. So despite the clear importance of churches and Christian tradition in American politics, the relationship between religion and government in America is complicated.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, perpetrated by terrorists linked with Muslim fundamentalism, religious freedoms and tolerance became issues at the foreground of popular discourse. Subsequent hate crimes, racial profiling, and controversies over the location of mosques illustrate possible limits on American religious tolerance. These and similar events were coupled with actions by the Bush administration to blur boundaries between government aid programs and select faith-based initiatives.

These conditions were surely not created by the Bush redemption narrative. Nonetheless, I suggest that it primed the public to compartmentalize Bush's religious associations as the most significant as part of his personal story. If that is accurate, then it is fair to consider whether or not this focus distracted voters from scrutinizing his religious beliefs in the context of his policies, actions or motivations. More effective responses to the narrative strategy might have allowed for greater public discourse regarding the appropriateness of his religious beliefs in the context of Jefferson's "Wall of Separation."

## 5.0 THE BUSH RESCUE NARRATIVE

In a series of four popular books, journalist Bob Woodward chronicles George W. Bush's management of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Provided unique access to officials, including hours of interviews with the president himself, Woodward delivers a behind-the-scenes account of the communication strategies used to legitimize and support the administration's military initiatives. Over the course of the four books, Woodward makes clear that the president and key members of his administration considered the wars, described by the administration as the "war on terror," as the most important part of his presidency.

Early in the second book, *Plan of Attack* (2004), Woodward reports that the president and others in the administration were interested in removing Saddam from power in Iraq from the beginning of Bush's term in office (prior to the 9/11 attacks). According to the account, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, raised the possibility that the events presented an "opportunity" to attack Iraq. Most of the administration's senior leadership advised Bush against pursuing Saddam Hussein immediately. Woodward quotes Vice President Dick Cheney: "If we go after Saddam Hussein, we lose our rightful place as good guy" (25). The moment exemplifies how the decision makers in the Bush administration were keenly aware of the importance of narrative strategy in legitimizing authority and garnering public support for military action, especially with regards to Iraq. The moment also illustrates the administration's quick understanding that the terrorist attacks provided a successful justification for war in Afghanistan, but would not alone, legitimize an invasion of

Iraq. Therefore, the administration employed a narrative strategy for Iraq that suited the particulars of that invasion and complemented the broader “war on terror” concept.

In order to legitimize and support the war in Iraq, the Bush administration offered several dubious rationales, each tied to shaping military action to heroic rescue. Saddam Hussein’s involvement in the 9/11 attacks, Iraq’s stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, and the need to liberate the Iraqi people were all cited as reasons for American invasion. According to George Lakoff, each of these justifications corresponds to different versions of what he labels as the rescue narrative (37). Lakoff characterizes this culturally common deep narrative as involving four primary kinds of characters: the Hero, the Victim, the Villain, and the Helpers:

The Hero is inherently good; the Villain is inherently bad. The main actions form a scenario, usually in this order: the Villainy, committed by the Villain against the Victim; the Difficulties undergone by the Hero; the Battle of the Hero against Villain; the Victory of Hero over Villain; the Rescue of the Victim by the Hero; the Punishment of the Villain; the Reward for the Hero. The Villainy upsets the moral balance. The Victory, Rescue, Punishment, and Reward restore the moral balance. There is also a variant in which the Hero is the Victim. This is a Self-defense narrative: the Hero rescues himself. (24)

In the administration’s various iterations of the story, the American military is the hero (represented by the commander-in-chief George W. Bush) and Saddam Hussein is the villain. The story’s victim may be the American or the Iraqi people, depending on which rationale for the invasion represents Hussein’s primary villainy: his complicity in the 9/11 attacks, his intention to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States, or, alternatively, his oppression of the Iraqi people. Casting the nation as both the victim and the hero of the rescue narrative allowed the administration to repackage revenge rhetoric as rescue rhetoric. However, once it became evident that there were no weapons of mass destruction, Bush retained the hero’s role and shifted primary focus to the oppressed citizens of Iraq as the Saddam Hussein’s victims (Lakoff 37). The story’s helpers are America’s military allies: labeled by the administration as

the “Coalition of the Willing.” Saddam’s punishment is his removal from office, and the reward for America is the access to the natural resources of Iraq.

Lakoff points to various American manifestations of this deep narrative, like comic-book figures, Superman and Spider-Man or screen heroes such as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* and the Lone Ranger (24). In citing the Lone Ranger, Lakoff introduces the genre of character I would suggest is most important for understanding Bush’s rescue narrative. While many popular genres of storytelling rely on and reinforce rescue narratives, the American film “Western” seems most relevant to the Bush strategy. Not only do many of the most prominent film Westerns reflect rescue narratives, but Bush’s performance of the rescue narrative, replete with cowboy masculinity, draws directly from the genre.

The 1960 popular film *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges, exemplifies a screen manifestation of the rescue narrative. Adapted from Akira Kurosawa’s Japanese film, *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *The Magnificent Seven* is the story of a small Mexican farming village victimized by a group of marauders, led by a charismatic, mustachioed bandit named Calvera. These villains routinely murder the town’s citizens and steal their food. Fed up with this oppression, a few of the men set out to hire gunslingers to defend the town from the attacks. They come by a man named Chris Adams who agrees to help them.<sup>12</sup> Much of the film is comprised of Chris’ efforts at gathering helpers for the mission. After successfully collecting six others Chris and the other gunslingers of the title arrive at the small village and, after initial hesitation, are welcomed as liberators. With some help from the villagers, they eventually punish the villains by killing Calvera and casting out his marauding band of villains, though four

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<sup>12</sup> The hero’s name, a combination of Christ and the bible’s first man, not only indicates the character’s identity as savior, but it also suggests the links between rescue narratives and the other narratives addressed in this dissertation. Christ is the heroic son of a dynasty narrative, and, according to Christian theology, he redeems man following Adam’s fall.

of the seven heroes die in the climactic battle. One of the seven is rewarded by finding a wife and home in the village.

This kind of story is typical within the genre, as heroic, wandering gunslingers come to the aid of innocent victims. As in *The Magnificent Seven*, these heroes have multiple kinds of motivation (often initially interested in financial gain), but are usually proven to be good-hearted avengers. At the end of these stories, the heroes usually leave the town once safety and order have been restored. It is unsurprising that the Bush administration utilized a narrative strategy linked to such stories. As made manifest in the American film Western, the rescue narrative offered several elements that audiences and voters might connect to the war in Iraq. Saddam Hussein, mustachioed and charismatic like Calvera, had hoarded wealth and killed people in Iraq. America had clear interest in Iraq's oil, but just as in the film Western, such interests would not necessarily disqualify gunslingers from being heroic. The moral good of rescuing a victimized group of people can eclipse any concern about mercenary behavior.

As Lakoff points out, George W. Bush's narrative strategy echoed the one his father successfully used to support the 1991 Persian Gulf War (37). In that circumstance (discussed in more detail in chapter 2 of this dissertation), the elder Bush cast Saddam Hussein as the villain and the small country of Kuwait as the victim of Hussein's villainy. Bush did not deny American interest in Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil, but suggested that such financial interests were secondary to saving Kuwait from Saddam Hussein. In both wars, the administrations carefully shared the invasion with a coalition of helper-nations. Following other rescue narratives, the cooperation of such allies suggested a consensus regarding the ultimate moral good of the cause.

The Bush rescue narrative was also linked to the two other Bush narratives discussed in this dissertation. While the elder Bush successfully waged war against Saddam Hussein in 1991,

he left Iraq and the Iraqi people to the villain. George W. Bush's mission to rid the world of the same villain would allow him to finish the job his father started. The invasion of Iraq and ultimate defeat of Saddam Hussein, then, represented the complex climax for the Bush dynasty and rescue narratives.

Similarly, Bush's rescue of the American or Iraqi people from the villain Saddam Hussein might also have served as the ultimate divine commissioning of the Bush redemption narrative. Bush's "war on terror" was the center of his presidency. As he recalls in *Decision Points*, "the focus of my presidency, which I had expected to be domestic policy, was now war" (139). This aspect of the narrative – that Bush did not choose to wage the war, but had been called to it – was critical to ensuring support for the war and fit both the rescue narrative and the redemption narrative. The gunslinger hero was always asked to help defeat a villain, and God had always commissioned the converted. Likewise, in the Bush rescue narrative, the president was being called to war that he would rather have avoided.

In his 2007 book, *Homeland Mythology: Biblical Narratives in American Culture*, Christopher Collins locates the Bush rescue narrative as part of a cultural tradition that he calls the "abduction narrative" (151). Fundamentally equivalent to Lakoff's rescue narrative, Collins' abduction narrative is:

a three-person plot, featuring a villain, a victim, and a hero: the villain acts by taking the victim, the hero acts by retaking the victim, while the victim functions as the passive object of exchange. (122)

He argues that American culture has long displayed a particular fascination for abduction narratives, particularly in legitimizing the Anglo-American possession of the North American continent. Noting the obvious philosophical conflict between the rhetorical values at the heart of America's political founding (freedom, fairness, and independence, etc.) and the institution of

slavery and the conquest of Native Americans, Collins suggests that rescue narratives can help resolve these contradictions of conscience. He explains:

Abduction narratives, which represent vulnerable white Protestant Americans targeted by hostile aliens, allowed readers troubled by their nation's history and its ongoing policies to preserve, intact, both their moral principles and their ill-gotten gains. By representing the Indians' resistance as unprovoked aggression, they vindicated their Christian principles; then, having projected this evil onto its actual victims through popular narratives, they could portray themselves as innocent. (146-147)

Collins' argument suggests that abduction narratives are used to legitimize aggressive military actions by successfully binding them to heroic actions. Collins argues that these stories fundamentally parallel Lyotard's modern master narrative regarding the inevitable success of social progress promoting individual liberty. He also suggests that this modern master narrative was authorized by the pre-modern liberation narrative where the heathens will be converted to Christianity (152).

These ideas, of course, echo the central notions of American exceptionalism that specify that American ideals transcend those of other cultures, including, and perhaps especially Native American culture. As I discuss in chapter 2 of this dissertation, this transcendence is embodied in the American presidency. The office represents the transcendent ideals that authorize and support the military actions the office-holder takes as commander-in-chief.

This historical context is intrinsic to George W. Bush's use of the rescue narrative. As I addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation, heroic action serves as important character testimony for presidential leadership, and the office, in turn, helps legitimize the military decision-making of its occupant. The abduction stories used to support conquest of the American west in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century evolved into American film western stories used to

support American military conquests abroad.<sup>13</sup> I believe that the Bush rescue narrative strategy used to legitimize the war in Iraq derived from deep narratives long used to enable American military action.

### **5.1 GEORGE W. BUSH'S PERFORMANCE OF THE RESCUE NARRATIVE**

George W. Bush performed the rescue narrative through narration, ritual, and personal behavior. To his advantage, Bush borrowed some of his father's tactics to depict Saddam Hussein as a formidable villain and himself played the continuing reluctant hero in the context of the greater "war on terror" that began on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and included the invasion of Afghanistan and assaults on Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

George Lakoff points out that in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration made an important decision regarding communication strategy for the language used to describe the attacks. For the first few hours following the plane hijackings, administration spokesmen referred to the event as a "crime" (125). However, the administration quickly pivoted away from this language that framed the attacks as crimes committed by criminals and shifted to describing the attacks as acts of war. This shift proved crucial to the administration's subsequent military and foreign policy decision-making. In framing the attacks as acts of war, the administration could dodge the legal and moral burdens and rules associated

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<sup>13</sup> Playwright Arthur Kopit dramatized this phenomenon allegorically in *Indians* (1968). Produced in the context of the American war in Vietnam, the play tells the story of "Buffalo" Bill Cody and his Wild West show that helped authorize the United States' government assault on Native Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like the war in Iraq, American involvement in the war in Vietnam was promoted, in part, through a rescue narrative in which the Vietnamese people as the victim needed to be rescued from the abstract villain of communism.

with lawful arrest of suspects, examination of evidence, and conduct of trials. Lakoff also points out that labeling the attacks as acts of war provided an effective means for mitigating domestic criticism of the administration's actions, since criticism of military action could be more easily dismissed as "unpatriotic" than criticism of criminal prosecution (126). Most importantly, the conceptual shift allowed potential military responses to be broad-based instead of narrowly targeted. In part because Al-Qaeda proved difficult to attack directly, and because the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan had accommodated and supported the terrorist group without necessarily directly aiding the attacks on the United States, the administration knew it was necessary to blur the lines between any entities that supported the terrorist network with the terrorists themselves. In so doing, they effectively lowered the bar on the conditions required for war. Among others, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, a recurring American villain, and a particular nemesis for the new president's father, could easily be gathered into the category of perpetrators of "terror," and could easily appear as a target in the war.

Following the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush delivered an address to a joint session of the Congress on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001. As I discussed in chapter 2, such addresses, like the annual ritual "State of the Union," indicate the national significance of the content of the address and reassert the authority of the president. With the vice-president and Speaker of the House of Representatives standing behind him, Bush addressed the joint session as did presidents Bush, Reagan, and Franklin Roosevelt. (The last, of course, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that precipitated American involvement in World War II.) In this speech, Bush provided his justification for the invasion of Afghanistan while carefully framing that forthcoming military action within a bigger, broader concept he titled the "war on terror."

The president began his speech by commending the American people and leadership in responding. In his first direct description of the attacks, America itself is identified as the victim in need of rescue: “On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country.” After this broad description, of the victims and villains, he narrowed his focus first by identifying Al-Qaeda, and its leader Osama bin Laden, as the perpetrator of these particular attacks. Then he indicted the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as “sponsoring and sheltering and supplying” the terrorists. After presenting the Taliban with a series of ultimatums requiring the surrender of bin Laden and other terrorists, Bush returned to the broader frame:

Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. (cnn.com)

Later in the speech, Bush expressed a memorable sentiment that announced his administration’s broad authority to identify new villains:

Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.

Within months, Bush chose three countries to identify.

On January 29, 2002, Bush, again addressing a joint session of Congress, delivered the annual state of the union address. He updated the Congress and the public regarding the war in Afghanistan and reaffirmed American pursuit of terrorists and the regimes that harbor or support them:

Our nation will continue to be steadfast and patient and persistent in the pursuit of two great objectives. First, we will shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorists to justice. (presidentialrhetoric.com)

Introducing a second way of identifying enemies in this new war, the president continued:

And, second, we must prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world.

This second category signaled an expansion of potential enemies. Later in the speech, Bush specifically identified the regimes that now qualified as potential targets in the “war on terror:”

Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11th. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom.

Bush introduced Iraq and its misdeeds as the final regime:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens -- leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections -- then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

Following these descriptions that identified the citizens of North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as victims,

Bush announced a new term to describe their ruling regimes. In his words: “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil.”

In order to contextualize any action against these regimes, Bush returned to the broad “war on terror” that began with the 9/11 attacks and had no particular endpoint:

Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch -- yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch. We can't stop short. If we stop now -- leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked -- our sense of security would be false and temporary. History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight.

By placing hypothetical military action against Iraq within the context of this broader struggle, Bush accomplished several goals. First, and most obviously, the president was strengthening the implicit link between the 9/11 attacks and Saddam Hussein, as one of his villainous acts.

Second, Bush was able to contextualize any action within a grand historical narrative that pitted the broad concept of freedom against the broad concept of terror. This was similar to his father's

locating the first Gulf War in the context of the end of the Cold War. Finally, Bush situated potential military aggression as part of a rescue, even if it was self-rescue.

As political strategy, the rescue narrative proved effective in swaying popular and political opinion within the United States in favor of the invasion. While the invasion faced vocal domestic dissension and provoked significant diplomatic friction abroad, the United States Congress passed legislation providing the administration the authority to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power.

In announcing the invasion on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the president delivered a televised address that adhered to the language of the narrative:

Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly, yet our purpose is sure. 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. (presidentialrhetoric.com)

The war began as a rescue, and as soon as it was possible, the administration took the opportunity to stage a climax to the narrative.

On April 9, 2003, American marines helped a group of Iraqis pull down a 20-foot statue of Saddam Hussein (Woodward, *State of Denial* 161). Broadcast live on the 24-hour news networks, the scene gave the administration a perfect moment to signal the climactic liberation of the rescue narrative. At the end of the month, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld went to Iraq and addressed a large gathering of American troops:

You've rescued a nation. You've liberated a people. You've deposed a cruel dictator and you have ended this threat to free nations. You've braved death squads and dust storms, racing across hundreds of miles to reach Baghdad in less than a month. (Woodward, *State of Denial* 185)

Following Rumsfeld's address, the administration crafted one of the more unforgettable and ostentatious moments of recent presidential performance in a speech ostensibly delivered to announce the end of combat operations in Iraq.

As Bob Woodward reports, the administration crafted an event to echo the formal surrender of Japan on the battleship *Missouri* at the end of World War II (*State of Denial* 186). Updating the setting to a twenty-first century aircraft carrier, George W. Bush addressed the crew of the *Abraham Lincoln* as it sailed off the coast of San Diego, California. Broadcast for television, of course, Bush flew to meet the aircraft carrier in the second seat of Navy anti-submarine warplane and exited the plane while he wore full flight gear. Having flown in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, Bush's entrance in the scene signaled his personal role in the military success.

In addition to the aircraft carrier setting and the ostentatious entrance, Bush also delivered the speech under a gigantic banner reading "Mission Accomplished." While Bush never actually declared "mission accomplished" in his speech, the background image reinforced the event as a declaration of victory. While Bush's choice of words carefully allowed for the possibility of further hostilities in Iraq, the speech clearly marked the climax of the rescue narrative. As the president announced:

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

Bush continued by blending the hero/soldiers he addressed with those of America's past:

The character of our military through history -- the daring of Normandy, the fierce courage of Iwo Jima, the decency and idealism that turned enemies into allies -- is fully present in this generation. When Iraqi civilians looked into the faces of our servicemen and women, they saw strength and kindness and goodwill. When I look at the members of the United States military, I see the best of our country, and I'm honored to be your Commander-in-Chief.

He placed the events within the context of the greater "war on terror:"

The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11, 2001 - and still goes on. That terrible morning, 19 evil men -- the shock troops of a hateful ideology -- gave America and the civilized world a glimpse of their ambitions.

And:

The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We've removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more.

At the end of his speech, Bush paid tribute to the soldiers who died:

Those we lost were last seen on duty. Their final act on this Earth was to fight a great evil and bring liberty to others. All of you -- all in this generation of our military -- have taken up the highest calling of history. You're defending your country, and protecting the innocent from harm. And wherever you go, you carry a message of hope -- a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "To the captives, 'come out,' -- and to those in darkness, 'be free.'"

By using those words, Bush overtly references his rescue narrative and, unsurprisingly links it to the same biblical abduction narratives addressed by Christopher Collins.

In addition to his performances through ritual and narration, Bush's repeated patterns of behavior also reinforced the rescue narrative. More than any other characteristic of his behavior, Bush's cowboy masculinity promoted his role as hero of a rescue narrative. As Michael Kimmel has pointed out, Bush's performance of the American cowboy seems overtly modeled after the film Western archetype (278). As I addressed in chapter 3, his use of a Texas dialect and leisure activities like clearing brush on his ranch, contributed to the persona Bush maintained. In the context of the rescue narrative, this cowboy persona linked the president with the plain-spoken gunslingers of the screen. As he famously stated in his address to Congress following the 9/11 attacks: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Addressing his famous post-9/11 remark that he wanted bin Laden "dead or alive," Bush himself ties the use of such language that he calls "blunt" to his identity as a "West Texan" (*Decision Points* 140). These behaviors reinforced his gunslinger-hero role in the rescue narrative.

## 5.2 RESPONSES TO THE RESCUE NARRATIVE

In the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq, oppositional politicians failed to counter the Bush rescue narrative with any effectiveness. Instead, these politicians seemed to accept and reinforce almost all of the given circumstances of the Bush narrative and object only to the need for the United States to execute the rescue. For example, in a speech to Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies on September 27, 2002, Massachusetts senator Edward Kennedy gave a speech conceding the general principles of the rescue narrative:

No one disputes that America has lasting and important interests in the Persian Gulf, or that Iraq poses a significant challenge to U.S. interests. There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein's regime is a serious danger, that he is a tyrant, and that his pursuit of lethal weapons of mass destruction cannot be tolerated. He must be disarmed.  
(tedkennedy.org)

Kennedy's opposition derived from his objection to the need for military intervention:

There is clearly a threat from Iraq, and there is clearly a danger, but the Administration has not made a convincing case that we face such an imminent threat to our national security that a unilateral, pre-emptive American strike and an immediate war are necessary.

Thus, even as one of the more prominent political opponents of the war in Iraq accepted the general terms of the Bush rescue narrative, implicitly accepting the notion that the United States could be a potential victim of Saddam Hussein. While acknowledging Saddam Hussein's atrocities seems like a reasonable concession, it is problematic in the context of the rescue narrative since it both reinforces the circumstances of the narrative and can have the effect of making George W. Bush look courageous in comparison to his domestic political opposition that acknowledges the villain's wrongdoing and the victim's suffering but argues against taking action.

Such character foils are prevalent in other rescue narratives. For example, in *The Magnificent Seven*, there is a scene where the men of the farming village decide that the human and material cost of fighting the villain Calvera is too great. They decide to ask Chris and the other heroes to leave their town. Of course, the heroes do so reluctantly and, in the end, bravely return to save the town from the villain. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker's helper Han Solo decides against joining the climactic assault on the villains before experiencing a change of heart and returning to the battle at the last second. Kennedy and many other prominent American politicians that opposed the war inadvertently played these roles and contributed to the effectiveness of the Bush rescue narrative by making Bush look more like a courageous, resolute hero.

Interestingly, a little-covered speech by a state senator from Illinois approached the material a little differently and with greater effectiveness. Even while acknowledging Hussein's atrocities, Barack Obama's speech at an anti-war rally in Chicago on October 2, 2002 articulated an opposing narrative:

What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors in this administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.

What I am opposed to is the attempt by political hacks like Karl Rove to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income — to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression. That's what I'm opposed to. A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics. Now let me be clear — I suffer no illusions about Saddam Hussein. He is a brutal man. A ruthless man. A man who butchers his own people to secure his own power. He has repeatedly defied UN resolutions, thwarted UN inspection teams, developed chemical and biological weapons, and coveted nuclear capacity. He's a bad guy. The world, and the Iraqi people, would be better off without him.

But I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military a fraction of its former strength, and that in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of

history. I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaida. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars. (npr.org)

While the future president's speech acknowledges Saddam Hussein's atrocities, he does so only after establishing a new narrative: that the decision to go to war derived primarily out of aggression instead of rescue. Had Obama been a prominent leader of political opposition to Bush at the time, perhaps the effectiveness of the rescue narrative might have been undermined by the narrative he puts forward. Surely, Obama's subsequent electoral successes suggest his own effectiveness at political communication.

Nonetheless, such conjecture must also take into account two additional aspects of the prominent responses to the Bush rescue narrative. First, while a significant number of Democrats opposed the war, many others, including prominent legislators such as Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, supported President Bush's decision to pursue the conflict. That support probably undermined any counter-narrative from the institutional left. Second, any counter-narrative from politicians would have to be careful to avoid appearing anti-patriotic.

In the arts and entertainment arenas, however, potential counter-narratives were not limited by such concerns. The most popular counter-narratives were, like Obama's, rooted in the notion that the administration had ulterior motives in invading Iraq. These motives included, in some combination: American corporate control over Iraqi oil resources, the administration's financial ties to military contracting and industry (especially Dick Cheney's ties to Halliburton), the political efficacy of a "wartime" presidency, and/or George W. Bush's personal motivation to either outdo his father or avenge him, since Saddam Hussein had been accused of trying to assassinate George H. W. Bush. However, even these oppositional narratives could be

contained within the context of the Bush rescue narrative since ulterior motivations are common among the heroes of rescue narratives.

In order to examine the central hypothesis of this dissertation, the following subsections of this chapter focus on aspects of the subject plays that expose, reject, or replace elements of the Bush rescue narrative.

### **5.2.1 *Stuff Happens***

In *Stuff Happens*, David Hare dramatizes the events that led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The play premiered in London in September 2004 and a revised version of the play opened in New York in March 2006. The play's *dramatis personae* reflect the prominent politicians involved in the strategic and diplomatic events that Hare imagines for the stage. These include: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, George Tenet, Paul Wolfowitz, Michael Gerson in the Bush administration, as well as British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other prominent international figures.

During parts of the play, the actors playing the politicians re-present speeches, press-conferences and other performances by using verbatim transcripts from the public record. Borrowing conventions from the documentary theatre, Hare's stage directions instruct the actors to address the audience when they speak verbatim lines from their real-world counterparts. At other moments in the play (in private, or behind what Hare refers to as "closed doors"), the characters speak the words of the playwright, in a style of address that more closely resembles conventional realism. Hare's stage directions instruct a generic "actor" to narrate the transitions between these scenes.

After opening with testimonies from the major characters regarding their background, the central narrative thread begins with a meeting of the National Security Council on January 30, 2001 – ten days after Bush takes the oath of office. Early in the play, Hare imagines the moment shortly after the 9/11 attacks where George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld might have conceived the “war on terror”:

RUMSFELD. But I think we’re all beginning to feel a consensus. OK, we accept what we have to do first. We have to go after Al Qaeda and get its leader. We want to take out Osama bin Laden, we want to take out Mohammed Omar, we want to isolate them in their camps and destroy them. But I’m not sure that’s the rhetoric we should be using. Because I’m just pointing out – if we set targets, if we make targets, specific targets, if we make objectives and we don’t hit them – (*He waits a moment.*) – if we turn this guy into some kind of monster – this great monster Osama bin Laden – I mean, I’m saying I don’t think the President should even mention him.

BUSH. Huh.

RUMSFELD. I liked what you said earlier, sir. A war on terror. That’s good. That’s vague.

CHENEY. It’s good.

RUMSFELD. That way we can do anything. (23-24)

The scene plays for ironic laughs, and in the end, only Secretary of State Colin Powell objects to this plan.

Hare finds the theatrical humor (and perhaps horror) of the president (and certain others) forcing a simple melodramatic narrative onto a dramatic situation too complicated for such an approach. Yet Hare’s dramatization of the genesis of the administration’s communication strategy is theatrically effective not merely because it points out the incongruence of communication strategies with the subtleties of international politics or the complications of political motivation. Rather, I submit that the scene resonates because it places the hypothetical origin of the “war on terror” at the start of the play’s dramatic action – thereby illuminating the construct as underpinning the rescue narrative.

Furthermore, by borrowing conventions from the documentary theatre to put (in)famous words from the public record into the mouths of the stage versions of Bush and the others, Hare exposes how the administration communicated its narrative. For example, George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address is briefly presented and framed by an appearance by Bush head speechwriter Michael Gerson leading a team and saying about the address: "Make the best case for war in Iraq. But leave exit ramps" (32). Immediately following this, the actor playing Bush performs portions of the address including the introduction of the term "axis of evil." Hare then closes the frame with a statement from a British foreign officer about the address: "We all smiled at the jejune language. It sounded straight out of *Lord of the Rings*" (33).

Later, Hare depicts a closed-door conversation between Bush and Tony Blair at the president's Crawford ranch. Over the course of the scene, Blair pleads with Bush to refrain from communicating any public message that would suggest the decision to go to war in Iraq has been made prior to attempts at achieving diplomatic solution. Immediately following this conversation, Bush betrays this agreement by making the following statement to the press corps:

The prime minister and I, of course, talked about Iraq. We both recognize the danger of a man who's willing to kill his own people harboring weapons of mass destruction. This guy, Saddam Hussein, is a leader who gasses his own people. (37)

In Hare's version of events, Bush's commitment to these aspects of the rescue narrative in public appearances, as demonstrated by the preceding words from the public record, is contrasted with how the playwright imagines private discussion between Bush and Blair.

Even while evoking the rescue narrative, the dramaturgical structure of Hare's play questions its validity by offering a more sophisticated substitute. Throughout the play, Hare presents the administration's consistent efforts to fashion a rescue narrative replete with the characteristics of melodrama: one-dimensional villains commit crimes against innocent victims

and no one but bold heroes can rescue the victims from the villains. These stage versions of Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld regularly use verbiage and imagery consistent with those kinds of stories, and often derived from the public record. Meanwhile, the action that drives the more pivotal drama in *Stuff Happens* more closely resembles tragedy. Foiling the play's George W. Bush, Hare's stage versions of Colin Powell and Tony Blair are complex protagonists, internally conflicted by colliding personal principles in the context of unfolding international events. For example, two of the longest and most compelling scenes in the play involve Powell and Blair trying to ensure that Bush had not already decided to go to war prior to the diplomacy. In contrast, Hare's George W. Bush is neither psychologically conflicted nor otherwise complicated. While he appears on stage throughout the play as the primary decision maker among the characters, his story does not fuel the dramatic action. He simply pursues his obvious desire for war with singular determination throughout the play. For the most part, the president is presented as a character that believes the basic elements of the melodramatic narrative that he employs. In effect, despite all of his time on stage, George W. Bush's flat melodrama becomes the backdrop for a three-dimensional story about Powell and Blair.

In his review of the 2006 New York production for the *Times*, Ben Brantley acknowledges the effect of this phenomenon, though he oddly attributes it to the actors instead of the play. Brantley criticizes Jay O. Sanders' portrayal of George W. Bush as "less an evolving character than a fixed historical force." He praises Francis James' portrayal of Colin Powell: "He is Brutus in 'Julius Caesar,' an honorable man forced to run a race he no longer believes in." I believe that Brantley's observation is more accurately a function of the play responding to the rescue narrative rather than a result of uneven acting performances. By placing the competing kinds of story on the stage together, Hare offers a tragic counter-narrative to compete with the

administration's melodrama. In his dramaturgy, the tragedy of Powell and Blair effectively overwhelms Bush's melodrama.

Such contrast in narrative structure resembles the way different historians might approach retelling the same events. Indeed, Hare considers *Stuff Happens* a history play. As he writes in the author's note that precedes the first published edition: "*Stuff Happens* is a history play, which happens to centre on very recent history." Taking Hare at his word, it may be helpful, then, to consider how *Stuff Happens* might function as history.

In *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), Hayden White explicates a theory that suggests strong affinities among the kinds of narrative structures, understanding of historical causes, and political ideologies that comprise the re-telling of history. White understands that certain kinds of stories (he terms these *modes of emplotment*) tend toward particular ways of explaining historical events (*modes of explanation*) and both tend toward particular ideologies. These affinities are not absolute for White; he argues that the general tendencies are often unrealized in given historians and that masterpieces of the study of history reflect conflict between these affinities and the ideological commitment of their authors (70). Nonetheless, White's schema supports the fundamental idea that the *kind of story* being told tends to privilege certain phenomena as most important and sustain particular ideologies.

In layering tragedy over melodrama, Hare implicitly recognizes the affinities articulated by White. The Bush rescue narrative, as melodrama, focuses on the simplest sequences of events that are possible. Saddam Hussein is easily recognized as a villain based on his villainous actions. The administration's strategy, of course, also reflects an ideological position that Hare intends to resist. The playwright offers a competing version of events that takes a different narrative form (tragedy) and explains the historical events in a different way, by placing the

heroic characters at the mercy of forces beyond their individual control. For Hare, the perils of the Bush version of events (melodrama) lead to destruction and chaos that result from the invasion of Iraq. Hare's version (tragedy) yearns for the lessons of the history to inform the future and prevent such destruction.

In his *Ideology of Genre* (1994), Thomas Beebee argues that the notion of genre is rooted in the use-value of literary texts. In broad terms, Beebee understands such value through the malleability of genre and how the notion of genre contributes to intertextual discourse. As he explains, the "truly vital meanings of a text are often contained not in any specific generic category into which the text may be placed, but rather in the play of differences between its genres" (240). This latter idea may be useful in describing how *Stuff Happens* responds to the Bush rescue narrative. In my examination of the play as a response to the Bush rescue narrative, the conflict between tragedy and melodrama provides the play with its "vital meaning."

### **5.2.2 *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush***

Like *Stuff Happens*, Will Ferrell's virtuoso performance, *You're Welcome, America: A Final Night with George W. Bush* rejects the Bush rescue narrative. Unlike Hare, though, Ferrell's primary counter-narrative offers no competing version of how to order or explain the events. Instead, Ferrell, in ironic mode, fully invests in exposing the complete artifice of the Bush rescue narrative. In short, Ferrell's approach reflects the fundamental assumption that most of what Bush says is the opposite of truth. Again, I turn to Hayden White and borrow from his understanding the affiliations among irony as a linguistic strategy, a satirical mode of emplotment, and what he terms as either "agnosticism or cynicism as a moral posture" (74). I

submit that Ferrell's ironic performances as Bush reveal a complete cynicism regarding Bush's rescue narrative.

Ferrell's initial entrance deliberately burlesques George W. Bush's arrival for his speech on the *Abraham Lincoln* and establishes the ironic tone that dominates the play. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier in a plane safely piloted by an active military officer, while Ferrell descends upon the stage carried by a stagehand in flight gear. The dissonance inherent in the "mission accomplished" performance is echoed by the play's central conceit that Bush has come to Broadway to celebrate his presidency with an audience probably pleased to see him leaving office. Throughout the performance, the war in Iraq and the administration's communication strategies are ridiculed through a series of jokes. For example, Ferrell's Bush recalls key members of his administration as their photographs appear on the screens above the stage.

Regarding Secretary of State Colin Powell, Bush says:

Secretary of State Colin Powell: Tried to tell us Iraq was a bad idea. Tried to tell us suspension of *habeas corpus* was a bad idea. Said to me: 'You break it, you own it.' Then he still went along with us. God love him.

In Ferrell's satire, the tragic hero of Hare's play becomes the punch line of a joke that reveals that Bush values Powell for the same actions couched as tragic mistakes in *Stuff Happens*.

Later, the president reminisces about how his administration linked the 9/11 attacks to Saddam Hussein:

We had a very productive meeting. We had gleaned from exhaustive intelligence that Al Qaeda was the source of these 9/11 attacks.... So then we started looking of evidence linking Al Qaeda to Iraq and we kept looking and looking and looking and looking. The CIA looked back ten years in the records and found nothing. Then Cheney thought he'd help out by setting up his own intelligence agency in a broom closet at the Pentagon. And then -- bingo! -- we found evidence from one witness that no one had ever heard of before without any other backup that Iraq was trying to get yellow cake uranium.

This satirical recounting of the events directly contradicts the administration's claims that the president was reluctant to go to war and indicates that the stated rationales for doing so – the heart of the rescue narrative – were dishonest.

Ferrell then pokes fun at the communication strategies used to gain support for the invasion by exposing the ease with which the administration could manipulate the news media:

Here's the best part – here's how we get the story out to the American public. A (quote, unquote) anonymous White House source, basically us – Cheney, Rummy, Condi – whoever -- will speak to all the major media outlets, like the *New York Times* - suck my dick - *Times* and then Judy Miller or J-bomb would write up the story and the same people who planted the story – Cheney, Rummy, Condi, etc. – go on all the news shows like *Meet the Press*, *This Week in Washington*, *The View* and hold up the story that they planted and say: "Look what the *Times* said." Pretty good plan, huh? Yeah.

The humor of Ferrell's recounting the events derives from the combination of the simplicity of the administration's scheme and his character's simple-mindedness. Presenting a version of George W. Bush infused with all the foolishness of Ferrell's usual portrayals, he is still more than capable of articulating a disturbingly effective narrative strategy. The self-congratulatory nature of Bush's confession drives the humor, but the basic facts of the communication strategy are completely clear.

As he continues his story, Ferrell's Bush remains tied to the rescue narrative version of the war, however reality contradicts it:

Despite concerns of our NATO allies, despite antiwar protests in every major city in America including one million people here in New York, on March 20, 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched. By April 9<sup>th</sup>, it was done. People tore down a massive statue of Saddam Hussein ending his 24 year rule of that country. People were dancing in the streets. We were dancing in the Oval Office. I was King Shit of Turd Mountain.

The final line, of course, functions as form of ironic truth-telling since it resembles the kind of expression Ferrell's Bush would use, but the image might also well describe the actual situation in Iraq. The lights go down and following a brief interlude, Ferrell reappears dressed in full

flight gear standing on a desk in front of a screen shot of the “Mission Accomplished” banner from the *Abraham Lincoln*. He declares:

It truly was Mission Accomplished.

Then Ferrell has trouble getting down from the desk much like the American military had trouble maintaining the “victory” in Iraq. He addresses criticism of the occupation and quotes the litany of problems with the management of Iraq in the years following the “mission accomplished” speech. Echoing the assertion of the counter-narrative that the administration had no plan for winning the peace in Iraq, he acknowledges that the administration had no plans for anything once they were inside the country, but he says:

I do know this: removing Saddam Hussein from power was the right decision early in my presidency. It is the right decision now, and it will be the right decision ever.

Then the “real quote” sign is activated behind him. This signals to the audience that the line is from the public record. The humor of the moment derives both from Bush’s actual word choice lending credence to Ferrell’s caricature, as well as the administration’s continued maintenance of the rescue narrative rationale for the war even when two of the three evils attributed to Saddam Hussein had since been proven false and the occupation continued to be highly problematic years after the initial invasion. At the climax of the monologue, the recorded words of George W. Bush are more ironic than anything Ferrell could imagine or invent for the stage. While the play, premiering at the very end of the Bush presidency, offered no opportunity to oppose the invasion of Iraq, it certainly relies on its audience’s capacity to recognize and reject the strategy in retrospect.

Before the war began, Ferrell’s *Saturday Night Live* performances did address aspects of the rescue narrative. Shortly after the president’s 2002 State of the Union address, Ferrell played Bush in a sketch that feigned a television address to the nation. In that sketch, Ferrell mocked

the term “axis of evil” by suggesting that anyone or anything Bush did not like might be appropriately called a member of the “axis of evil” (snltranscripts.jt.org). Starting with Enron and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Ferrell’s Bush recited a list of axis of evil members, including fictional characters and instructed the citizen audience to ignore these things and go shopping. Obviously echoing the actual president in promoting commerce, Ferrell’s mocking of Bush’s State of the Union might have drawn attention to the administration’s narrative strategies. Reducing the “axis of evil” categorization to the laughably absurd may have effectively illustrated how such a label might be arbitrarily applied. However, that sketch might also have undermined valid criticism of the use of the language by masking its malevolence in childishness.

Late in *You’re Welcome, America*, Ferrell crafts a moment that suggests, in the right context, his portrayal can effect a deeper understanding of the ramifications of Bush’s performance of the rescue narrative. During Ferrell’s long recital of Bush’s time as commander-in-chief of the military and the “war on terror,” the audience laughs through the satirical recall of wrongdoing by the administration. Yet at the climax of that section of the performance, Ferrell’s Bush recalls solemnly that he had to send soldiers to die in the war. Played almost without irony, the moment prompts silence in the audience, probably unsure how to respond. The silence suggests that the audience faces an uncomfortable transition between the playfulness of Ferrell’s portrayal and the grim reality effected by the actual George W. Bush. Ferrell’s clownish version of Bush amuses and relies on an implicit understanding of Bush’s communication strategies, but when the audience needs to confront the possibility of actual suffering, the dissonance is appropriately jarring. The Bush rescue narrative is exposed for the

political strategy it is, and Ferrell's ironic performance elicits nothing but unnerving silence in its place.

### 5.2.3 *When We Go Upon the Sea*

Like Hare and Ferrell, Blessing relies on the clarity of hindsight to see Bush's actions retrospectively. In his play, Blessing fantasizes by placing the Bush rescue narrative in the context of international accountability. If Bush's narrative strategy evokes the lawless West of American mythology, then Blessing re-imagines what happens to a vigilante character from such a story in the context of a fully civilized system of law and order. In the specific moments the play dramatizes and in its premise, *When We Go Upon the Sea* responds to the Bush rescue narrative by sliding Bush from gunslinger hero to war criminal.

Over the course of the play, Blessing illustrates Bush's capacity for misleading through designed performance. In a particular moment of candor with his host Piet, the former president reveals his performance strategies as Blessing pokes fun at the president's ineloquence:

Most folks sound suspicious when they're terse. For me, it's a secret weapon. My handlers figured it out. Terser I get, the more intelligent I sound. Repetition. That's good, too. "Terrorists use violence and intimidation. Violence. Intimidation." See? Repeat key words. Like shampoo bottles? "Rinse. Repeat"? Buzz words. My speeches were ninety percent buzz words. (17)

Shortly after that revelation, Blessing offers a reference to the *Abraham Lincoln* performance and Bush's performance as a "man of the people":

GEORGE. Do I look good in a windbreaker?

PIET. You mean . . . like on the aircraft carrier?

GEORGE. No, no—that was a flight-suit. I mean a windbreaker, regular windbreaker, for walking around. Not sure I looked that good in it. Felt like that bald guy on "Star Trek", always trying to pull it down. Damn thing tested good, though. Made me look like "just folks". One of the people. Made me look . . . innocent.

These and similar moments establish George as fully conscious of his manipulations, a critical part of the fantasy that he might be held accountable for the crimes for which he is charged.

The play's title and central image (*When We Go Upon the Sea*) references the domination of the imperial elite crossing oceans to oppress weaker peoples. The imagery surfaces in the dialogue in the fifth scene as Piet and George snort cocaine together. With building intensity, the two discuss the imperial history of Europe and the United States as providers of technology and devastation, of modernity and disease, and implicitly of rescue and cruelty. The conversation climaxes in the mutual exclamation that wreaking destruction, slavery, and rape are the destiny of strong people over the weak (47-54). Blessing uses this discussion to highlight what he considers to be the root cause of Bush's military aggressions: the impulse of the powerful to rule by domination.

Blessing's language corresponds with Christopher Collins' description of the deep-rooted abduction narrative central to cultural and military oppression in American history. Even though he is conscious of his manipulative performances, Blessing's George submits to the mythology of his own rescue narrative. Perhaps recognizing the hypocrisy and dishonesty inherent in the narrative, in the end he blames the American people for his actions:

Now that the course of history's running where we want it to, is anyone grateful?  
'Course not. 'Cause then they'd feel implicated. Revealed. People need leaders to blame. What are they gonna do, blame themselves? Stop driving their SUV's? I'll tell you a secret—it's the whole trick to being President: never listen to what people say. Just watch what they do. (60)

These diatribes implicate the audience, of course, for blaming Bush instead of stopping him. Yet the moment also rejects the Bush rescue narrative as a veil that hides the truth that the powerful elite oppress weaker peoples as long as there is no law to prevent it. The rescue narrative masks the truth of imperialism, makes it more palatable, and ultimately authorizes it. It is not

surprising, then, that so many manifestations of rescue narratives take place in the context of political anarchy and that the Bush rescue narrative so clearly evokes the American film western.

In the end, however, Blessing's "fantasy" is directed to reality. In the current international order, George W. Bush has not been held accountable for his actions, and Blessing suggests that even if elite leaders themselves are punished the fundamental political dynamic is unchanged. He articulates this through a remark Piet makes to George after the latter suggests that since he is being prosecuted as a war criminal, he is no longer part of the elite:

You are. You are the elite. You'll be back, even if they convict you. They want a gesture to keep the illusion of justice alive, that's all. In time, they'll welcome you back.  
(55)

That line encapsulates a central theme in Blessing's play: historical and political forces are greater than individual leaders, and accountability for leaders like Bush is truly only a fantasy. This aspect of Blessing's play suggests that tragedy, not melodrama, better characterizes historical events. Bush's actions, however villainous, are contextualized by broader historical and political forces.

In the end, the play clearly exposes and rejects the Bush rescue narrative by recognizing it as a manufactured communication strategy and presenting a subjunctive reality where institutions of international civilization demand accountability. However, the relationship between the people Bush represents and the actions he takes is less clear. Does Blessing essentially dismiss Bush as a scapegoat for the material greed of Americans that desire the spoils of war even when they hypothetically disapprove of it? Alternatively, does Blessing consign Bush to merely one actor in a broad, historical struggle between the inclination of the powerful to oppress and the civilizing interests eager to prevent them from doing so?

#### 5.2.4 *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

In responding to the Bush rescue narrative, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert took full advantage of their roles as “newscasters.” Because Bush’s performance of the rescue narrative relied heavily on his narration of historic events, the success of the strategy depended on the news media giving those performances the intended frames. For example, the narrative strategy required the media to broadcast the speech announcing the invasion during prime-time television viewing hours. Similarly, the administration expected video clips of Bush’s landing on the *Abraham Lincoln* to reference explicitly the end of World War II. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart was able to frame each of the major Bush performances with his own commentary that established a competing narrative. Likewise, Stephen Colbert’s ironic performances illuminated the news media’s complicity in executing the administration’s rescue narrative.

*The Daily Show* broadcast on January 30, 2002 provided Stewart the opportunity to report on Bush’s first official State of the Union address. The initial jokes surrounding the speech were obvious. Poking fun at the ritual, Stewart showed a video clip of Bush listing the country’s ails (war, recession, dangers to civilization) followed by the traditional reporting that the state of the union had “never been stronger.” He approached the establishment of the axis of evil as Will Ferrell would on Saturday Night Live. Stewart referenced Bush’s list of nations then facetiously added Sweden for making films thick with symbolism nobody understands and Mexico for “looking silly” (thedailyshow.com). Following these broad jokes, Stewart directed his response to Bush’s specific accusations against Iraq. In a video clip, Bush says: “The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. “ Jon Stewart responded with “Anthrax. Nerve gas. And nuclear weapons. Who do they think they are? Us?”

Like Blessing, Stewart raises questions about Americans' complicity in enabling the military machinations of their leaders. Yet Stewart points out the hypocrisy of the charges against the Iraqi regime in particular because he understands that the administration has used the speech to initiate its rationale for additional war. In the year that followed, *The Daily Show* reported on the diplomatic events (those chronicled in *Stuff Happens*) through a regular segment called: "Showdown: Iraq?" as if to suggest that the target of military aggression had been selected arbitrarily. Throughout that coverage, Stewart consistently referred to the potential invasion of Iraq as an eventual certainty instead of reporting on the administration's diplomatic efforts as sincere. For example, on the January 13, 2003 program, Stewart reported on a story regarding what White House spokesperson had to say regarding the administration's "zero tolerance" for Saddam having weapons of mass destruction. Following this segment, Stewart looked at his audience and sighed: "We're going to war" ([thedailyshow.com](http://thedailyshow.com)). The administration probably expected the news media to present the zero tolerance policy as evidence that Saddam Hussein would deserve any military action taken against him. Rejecting that charge, Stewart re-frames the moment for what it is: part of a story told to sanction military invasion.

Bush delivered a speech on March 17, 2003 that ostensibly gave Saddam Hussein a 48-hour deadline to surrender before the invasion would begin. The president addressed the Iraqi people directly during a portion of that speech. This was in keeping, of course, with the aspect of the rescue narrative that held the Iraqi people as Saddam Hussein's victims and the American military as the heroes. Reporting on that portion of the speech in particular, Stewart played portions of Bush's address and facetiously finished his thoughts. For example, in the actual address, Bush promised the Iraqi people: "We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will

help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. “ Stewart played a video clip of the first part of the promise and replaced the second with a punch line that suggested the ulterior motive: “We will tear down the apparatus of terror and put up a Wal-Mart” (thedailyshow.com). Later in the same segment, Stewart showed the portion of the speech where Bush urged the Iraqi military to surrender and refrain from committing vandalism. Bush stated: “Do not destroy oil wells, a source of wealth that belongs to the Iraqi people.” Stewart appended: “He added, ‘like Dick Cheney of Halliburton,’” pronouncing the name of the vice-president and defense contractor as if they were Iraqi names.

In reporting on Bush’s performance on the *Abraham Lincoln*, Stewart aimed his critique at the news media’s willingness to be manipulated into serving as the conduit for the climax of the Bush rescue narrative. Stewart reports:

Our president did something historic today. I don’t know if you saw it, President Bush landed in a fighter jet on the *U.S.S Abraham Lincoln* to announce the end of hostilities in Iraq. Wow. Many, some might say ‘all,’ reporters were on hand for the occasion including our own Rob Corddry, Senior Naval Correspondent. (thedailyshow.com)

Using *The Daily Show*’s standard convention of the correspondent obviously pretending to be on location, Corddry played the part of the television journalist co-opted by the administration.

When asked by Stewart to describe the events, he did so in spectacular detail as he feigned great enthusiasm. Stewart then asked Corddry:

Did anyone amongst the reporters think it was a little *much*?

Corddry responded:

The war’s over man. Where’s your showmanship? Plus, Jon, there’s a precedent for important announcements being made on warships. Who could forget Cher’s dramatic sashay on board the *U.S.S Missouri* as she announced she could, in fact, turn back time.

This exchange exposes the media’s complicity in the communication of the rescue narrative and, by comparing the event to a notoriously ostentatious music video performance, provides an

alternate way of thinking about the event. Immediately following Corddry's remark, *The Daily Show* plays a clip from the video from the entertainer Cher, dressed in transparent attire and singing to a deck full of sailors. Rather than accepting the event as the climax of the rescue narrative, Stewart presents it as a silly spectacle.

Later in the exchange, Stewart asks Corddry:

Why couldn't they have just made the speech about the end of hostilities in the Rose Garden?

He responds:

Oh come on, Jon, we needed this. This war didn't have the climax of other conflicts. No surrender at Appomattox. No treaty signing at Versailles. No part where Jeff Goldblum blows up the alien mothership using a laptop.

Explicitly acknowledging the stagecraft and the administration's attempt at creating a performance with historical resonance, *The Daily Show* compares the performance to the popular, patriotic movie *Independence Day* (1996). Another example of a rescue narrative, the plot consists of an invasion of the Earth by villainous aliens, followed by the rescue of humanity by a small group of Americans, including a military pilot who is also the president of the United States.

Stewart pleads with Corddry:

Rob, don't lose your objectivity. Rob I can tell you're very excited to be on this beautiful battleship but...

Corddry, distracted by an "off-camera" conversation, responds to Stewart:

Oh... Yes!, Jon, the lieutenant just said it was me and the CNN guy's turn to fire a tomahawk missile at Mexico, which is sweet!

Corddry runs off the screen and Jon Stewart turns to the camera and says:

Alright. Losing his objectivity.

The humorous exchange clearly suggests that the news media has been charmed into serving as a means for the administration to provide a climactic scene for its particular narrative. Again, *Daily Show* viewers must recognize the event as a function of the rescue narrative in order for its humor to be effective.

I believe that these moments suggest that in order to appreciate Stewart's jokes fully, *Daily Show* viewers recognized Bush's rescue narrative, including both the supposed reluctance to go to war and the motivations for doing so, as blatant political communication schemes. Stewart then offered alternative narratives that suggested the true purpose of the administration's actions and identified potential ulterior motivations for starting the war. Furthermore, Stewart used Bush's own performances in order to make that case.

As the war in Iraq dragged on, *The Daily Show* continued its coverage with a series of regular segments called "Mess O' Potamia." The title pun and the underlying reports regarding the complexities and challenges during the American occupation of Iraq reflected the counter-narrative that eventually prevailed regarding the invasion itself: that despite the relatively easy victory over the regime of Saddam Hussein, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq was not accurately represented through the rescue narrative, constructed and executed by the Bush administration with support from the news media.

Like his *Daily Show* counterpart, Stephen Colbert, through his trademark ironic portrayal of a conservative media personality, mined humor from the dissonance between the rescue narrative and what was actually happening during the years-long American occupation of Iraq. In a December, 2006 episode of *The Colbert Report*, for example, the host announced that he had identified who was at fault for the problems in Iraq. He first dismissed the president from being culpable for Iraq by implicitly connecting the war in Iraq to the Bush redemption narrative:

We know it's not the president's fault. George W. Bush was made commander-in-chief by God and God don't appoint no junk. (colbertnation.com)

Colbert proceeded to show clips of former House majority leader Tom DeLay and other conservatives blaming the American people for not supporting the war and therefore causing the failure.

In April of 2007, Colbert interviewed the actor and anti-war activist Sean Penn. In full faux-confrontation mode, Colbert accused Penn of treason by "speaking out against the commander-in-chief in a time of war." (colbertnation.com) Later in the same interview, Colbert mimicked the extent to which the administration and its supporters clung to aspects of the rescue narrative by asking Penn the following question regarding his 2002 trip to Iraq:

Any chance that you're the one that snuck the WMDs out to embarrass our president?

In moments like these, Colbert continued to find humor in playing the part of media co-conspirator for an administration continuing to adhere to their communication strategy regarding the war in Iraq. In addressing the rescue narrative in the years following the start of the war, Colbert's approach resembled those of both Jon Stewart and the plays I have considered.

Each of the performances recognizes the rescue narrative strategy employed by the administration. *Stuff Happens* and *When We Go Upon the Sea* offer counter-narratives to the Bush strategy. Hare tries to expose the melodramatic inadequacy of the rescue narrative by contrasting it with tragedy. Blessing fantasizes about the anarchy implicit in the rescue narrative in the context of effective international law. Will Ferrell's performances, meanwhile, exploit the pretense of the rescue narrative for ironic humor and cynicism.

Similar to my observations regarding the other two Bush narratives, it seems clear that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* respond to the Bush rescue narrative at least as effectively as the subject plays. In the end, the most important limitations of the plays in serving

as a medium to counter the Bush rescue narrative derives from the lag between the events addressed in the plays and their performances and their limited ability to counter the perceived validity of Bush's own performances using the widely accepted window on reality: televised clips. With Ferrell's entrance, for example, audiences can laugh at the memory of Bush's landing on the *Abraham Lincoln* and recognize the preposterousness of the event all the more in the context of recent history. However, Stewart's reporting on the event by re-contextualizing actual video footage of Bush on the very evening it occurred is obviously more likely to have a real-time impact on countering the effectiveness of the rescue narrative.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that each of the three theatrical performances addressed in this chapter makes attempts to reconcile their versions of the president with the version memorialized through digital media. *Stuff Happens* incorporates verbatim text of public figures, including George W. Bush, in order to ground the "history" play in recent history and to contrast the administration's story with Hare's competing narrative. The prominence of "actual quotes" from George W. Bush in *You're Welcome, America* lends credibility to Ferrell's ridiculousness. Finally, Blessing links his stage character George with the actual president by dramatizing his character's retrospective consideration of (in)famous Bush performances. In the theatre, these attempts reflect not only an attempt to validate the stage versions of Bush, but they also expose aspects of Bush's own performances that sustain his rescue narrative.

### 5.3 CONCLUSIONS

In undertaking this study, I sought to test whether theatrical performance might offer the political left a model for responding to the communication strategies of the political right. As a starting point for this study, I accepted arguments offered by George Lakoff and Drew Westen, who have suggested that the communication strategies of the political right have recently outperformed those of the left. According to these scholars, that dynamic derives from the right's success in appealing to unconscious cognitive processing within the human mind.

In order to test this hypothesis, I constructed a case study of theatrical performances as responses to particular narrative strategies executed by the campaigns and administration of George W. Bush. To provide a theoretical basis for parallel examination of the Bush performances to the theatrical performances, I looked to the work of thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, Bruce McConachie, and Brian Boyd to understand the common evolutionary and cognitive roots of storytelling and political hierarchy. Based on that understanding, I examined the development of contemporary presidential storytelling and created a rubric for analyzing presidential performance by demarcating categories that serve narrative purposes. On the basis of this work, I conducted a close examination of three George W. Bush narrative strategies and particular theatrical and television responses to those strategies.

I believe that the final value of my work is bifurcated, much like the dissertation's structure. I believe that the theoretical and historical framework I developed in order to test my central hypothesis became a productive outcome itself, as a synthesis of understanding derived from multiple disciplines. I do not mean to suggest that each of the links I made in developing that framework breaks new ground. Instead, I hope that the first two chapters of the dissertation

demonstrate that the cognitive and evolutionary links between presidential storytelling and performance are well-established through the work of scholars from different disciplines. Nonetheless, I hope that in drawing explicit lines between the shared cognitive properties of the performance of presidential stories and other forms of storytelling, I might shed light on links that were previously only implied. I also hope that the rubric I developed to categorize particular aspects of presidential performance offers a useful way of examining how such performances might serve narrative strategies that operate through unconscious cognition.

I examined how specific aspects of George W. Bush's performances served particular narrative strategies in order to compare Bush's performances to those considered in the case study plays. In retrospect, I hope that my analysis of Bush's performances might contribute to understanding the political effectiveness of activating deep narrative links in the unconscious minds of American voters. George W. Bush departed the White House as unpopular as any contemporary president since Harry Truman (people-press.org). However, he won two national elections and many of his prominent policies, especially those related to the "war on terror," continue to thrive, even during the presidency of Barack Obama (Zelizer, *Why*). There is obvious value in examining how he achieved and maintained political authority. Such examinations may become even more valuable as the Bush presidency recedes into memory.

The impetus for my study, however, derived from curiosity about whether and how the political left might look to the stage to find ways to respond to the strategies of the right. Following my examination of the four case-study plays and the Stewart/Colbert programs, I can conclude that these performances do, indeed, engage actively with Bush's narrative strategies. Prominent playwrights like Lee Blessing and David Hare, comic film star Will Ferrell, and lesser known musical playwrights like Adam Mathias and John Herin, all offered direct responses to

Bush's dynasty, redemption, and rescue narratives. To some extent, each of the four plays present stage versions of George W. Bush that expose the links between the identified deep narratives and Bush's performances. However, the degree to which these plays provide models to resist the narrative strategies is less clear. Even if the plays do respond more directly than did the political institutions of the oppositional left that seemed to ignore these strategies, the effectiveness of the plays as responses may be limited.

I addressed these limitations in the preceding chapters, but two seem worthy of particular mention here. The more significant of these has to do with how crucial mediatised *framing* of Bush's performance is to the narrative strategies. The theatrical performances offer alternative, subjunctive versions of the Bush performances instead of re-ordering Bush's own performances. This limits the extent to which the plays can engage with the media framing. I refer the reader to my analysis of Will Ferrell's "mission accomplished" burlesque in chapter 5 in comparison to Jon Stewart's coverage of the event for a clear example of this limitation. Another important limitation may derive from the degree to which the theatrical plays tend to accept the basic structure of a Bush narrative in order to argue against it. For example, as I discuss in chapter 4, Lee Blessing's *When We Go Upon the Sea* follows the Bush redemption narrative to an alternative climax. In order to do so, however, the playwright accepts the premise and general shape of the redemption narrative. Assuming that the deep narrative links between Bush and other redemption narratives have already been activated long before the plot resolves, the effectiveness of the play as a response is limited. As ironic alternatives to the news programs that typically frame political performances, Stewart and Colbert reverse this tendency of the plays and often reveal the news media's complicity in the Bush strategies.

I surmise that the applicability of this case-study to other theatrical performances may best be estimated by examining the way other theatrical responses might tend toward these same limitations. In the end, that understanding reveals the critical value of the Stewart/Colbert comparison for this dissertation. Even though the plays respond to aspects of the Bush narratives by exposing, rejecting, or replacing them, their effectiveness must be questioned when compared with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Indeed, I conclude that as model responses to the presidential narratives, the more successful theatrical performances are likely those that share attributes with the “fake” news on late-night television.

That Barack Obama has been twice-elected as president may call into the question the future of the political right’s storytelling supremacy. George Lakoff points to what he calls the “rags-to-riches” narrative as an effective Obama narrative strategy (29). Others have pointed out that Obama’s appeal to voters resembles a “liberation” narrative (Dionne). However, it is also important to recognize the power of the right’s effective oppositional narratives that bind Obama to negative narratives of usurping, duplicitous “others,” as Drew Westen noticed early in Obama’s first presidential campaign (*Political* 246-247). Westen himself has questioned President Obama’s capacity to maintain effective narrative strategies to oppose those of the unrelenting right (*What*).

If effective communication strategies are critical to the maintenance of political power in the contemporary United States, then narrative strategies directed toward unconscious cognitive processing require continued attention. Regardless of ideological positioning, historians and scholars should exam how candidates and presidents seek to activate the cognitive links that form between their performances and popular stories that share deep narratives. If Lakoff and

Westen are correct, then political operatives of the left should also endeavor to acknowledge and understand the way the right targets the unconscious minds of American voters.

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