

How Leaders Promote War by Exploiting Our Core Concerns

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The pursuit of war is the most consequential of all decisions for a country's leaders. Taking up arms brings with it the likelihood of death for thousands and a dramatically altered way of life for millions. While circumstances vary considerably from one violent conflict to another, from a psychological perspective there is surprising consistency in the public appeals that leaders use to garner support for their war agenda. My own research suggests that the selling of war often relies on appeals to five specific core concerns, revolving around issues of vulnerability, injustice, distrust, superiority, and helplessness.

These five concerns are key lenses through which individuals, groups, and nations make sense of the world. For most of us, nothing is more important than providing security for the people we care about (vulnerability). We often react to perceived mistreatment with anger and resentment, and an urge to right wrongs and punish those we hold responsible (injustice). We tend to divide the world into those who are untrustworthy and those who are deserving of our trust (distrust). We frequently insist that we are better than others in important ways (superiority). And we strive to avoid feeling helpless, and to instead control what happens in our lives (helplessness).

In abstract and oversimplified form, a leader's standard call to arms—legitimizing the use of violence on a massive scale—looks like this: "Our nation is facing grave danger from outsiders. Terrible injustices have been perpetrated against us. Our trust in others has led only to betrayal. But we are a special people far greater than our enemies. And we will prevail in our efforts to defend ourselves and to secure our future." Relying on examples from public speeches, in this essay the use of appeals to these five core concerns in a specific and tragic context is examined: the Bush administration's promotion of the 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, as part of the "Global War on Terror."

Vulnerability appeals are used by leaders to argue that their actions are necessary to protect the country from dire threats, and that the policies

promoted by others will instead make everyone less safe. Concerns over personal and collective vulnerability are powerful influences on individuals and groups alike. No issue touches us more deeply or directs our actions more strongly than the desire to insure our own safety and to protect the people and things we care about. As a result, fear and the quest for security often trump all other considerations, leading us to take seriously any suggestion of threat and potential hostility from outsiders. So it is not surprising that appeals targeting our vulnerability concerns can be especially effective in promoting a war agenda.

In the run-up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, U.S. administration officials repeatedly used such appeals to promote “preventive” military action against Saddam Hussein’s regime. Especially dramatic were the warnings about Iraq’s purported weapons of mass destruction. For example, in an August 2002 speech in Nashville Vice President Dick Cheney argued, “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.” Two months later, President George Bush described this troubling image to a Cincinnati audience: “America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.” And in December 2002 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made this unequivocal statement at a news briefing: “Any country on the face of the earth with an active intelligence program knows that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.”

No such weapons were ever found in Iraq. But by linking the war to our “Global War on Terror,” the Bush administration continued to employ similar vulnerability appeals. Speaking at the Federalist Society’s national convention in 2006, the vice president offered this analysis: “On the morning of September 11th, we saw that the terrorists need to get only one break, need to be right only once, to carry out an attack. . . . So to adopt a purely defensive posture, to simply brace for attacks and react to them, is to play against lengthening odds, and to leave the nation permanently vulnerable.” In much the same way, with debate intensifying as the war wore on, President Bush offered recurrent vulnerability warnings, such as this one: “If we do not defeat the terrorists and extremists in Iraq, they won’t leave us alone—they will follow us to the United States of America.”

Appeals to vulnerability were also used to argue that alternatives other than war would not satisfactorily address the current peril—and might even make matters worse. Shortly before the invasion, during a national press conference the president addressed the issue this way: “The risk of doing nothing, the risk of hoping that Saddam Hussein changes his mind and becomes a gentle soul, the risk that . . . inaction will make the world safer, is a risk I’m not willing to take for the American people.” In a direct political move, at a

town hall meeting in Des Moines just before the 2004 election Vice President Cheney warned of what might happen if voters made the wrong decision: “If we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we’ll get hit again and we’ll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”

Injustice appeals are used by leaders to argue that their actions are a necessary response to the injustices perpetrated by others, and that those who criticize their actions are themselves behaving unjustly. Most of us are strongly aroused by issues of injustice, in our personal lives and in our group attachments. We react to perceived mistreatment—from minor slights to profound abuses—with anger and resentment, and often with a desire for retaliation and vengeance against those we see as perpetrators. We therefore are primed to respond affirmatively when told that we have been wronged and that scores must now be settled. As a result, our readiness to avenge perceived injustices is another soft target for leaders committed to war.

Injustice appeals were a key part of the Bush administration’s rhetorical arsenal ever since the terrorist attacks on 9/11. In his 2003 State of the Union address, the president assured the American people that, “We have the terrorists on the run. . . . One by one, the terrorists are learning the meaning of American justice.” When discussing the Iraq War in a speech three years later, President Bush reminded his audience, “Today . . . the former Iraqi dictator is sitting in a courtroom instead of a palace—and he’s now facing justice for his crimes.” In 2006, Vice President Cheney also sought to rally support for war policies by invoking a similar injustice appeal. Speaking at a convention, he highlighted the legitimacy of retaliation: “They hate us, they hate our country, they hate the liberties for which we stand. And they hit us first. And we will not sit back and wait to be hit again.”

Appeals to injustice also played an important role in the Bush administration’s promotion of military commissions for trying detainees held at Guantanamo Bay. At a White House event in September 2006, the president defended the need for such commissions: “It’s essential for us to use all reliable evidence to bring these people to justice. We’re now approaching the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—and the families of those murdered that day have waited patiently for justice.” A month later, upon signing the Military Commissions Act, President Bush offered this assurance: “With our actions, we will send a clear message to those who kill Americans: We will find you and we will bring you to justice.”

When public dissent threatens to derail a war agenda, injustice appeals are often used to portray any objections as unfair. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld regularly targeted the media in this way. Amid reports that Guantanamo

detainees were being treated inhumanely, he offered this response at a January 2002 news briefing: “I haven’t found a single scrap of any kind of information that suggests that anyone has been treated anything other than humanely—notwithstanding everything we have read and heard.” Speaking at Johns Hopkins University three years later, the Defense Secretary issued a much broader condemnatory critique: “The worst about America and our military seems to so quickly be taken as truth by the press, and reported and spread around the world, often with little context and little scrutiny, let alone correction or accountability after the fact.”

Turning to distrust appeals, leaders argue that their actions are necessitated by the dishonesty of our enemies, and that those who object are untrustworthy, disloyal, or misguided. We often divide the world into those we deem trustworthy and those we consider unworthy of our trust. If our judgments are accurate, we can select our allies wisely, and we can avoid harm from those who have hostile intent or are merely unreliable. Assessments of when and where distrust is appropriate can be critically important in steering us away from bad outcomes. Promoters of a war agenda therefore frequently target this core concern in their appeals, encouraging the adoption of an “us versus them” mindset.

In the context of the Iraq War, the Bush administration consistently emphasized that U.S. actions were necessitated by Saddam Hussein’s dishonesty. Speaking at the White House less than six months before the invasion, President Bush explained the situation this way: “We know the methods of this regime. They buy time with hollow promises. They move incriminating evidence to stay ahead of inspectors. They concede just enough . . . to escape punishment, and then violate every pledge when the attention of the world is turned away.” He reiterated this distrust appeal in his 2003 State of the Union address: “Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production. Saddam Hussein has not credibly explained these activities. He clearly has much to hide. The dictator of Iraq is not disarming. To the contrary; he is deceiving.”

A similar appeal to distrust was repeatedly employed post-invasion, to remind the public that they must not be deceived into abandoning their support for the war. For example, speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations in February 2006, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld described our adversaries this way: “They’re trained to lie. They’re trained to allege that they’ve been tortured. They’re trained to put out misinformation, and they’re very good at it.” And at a White House press conference later that year, the president offered this response to reporters’ questions: “We must not fall prey to the sophisticated propaganda by the enemy, who is trying to undermine our confidence and make us believe that our presence in Iraq is the cause of all its problems.”

Distrust appeals are also used to marginalize voices raised in opposition to a war agenda. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Attorney General John Ashcroft adopted this strategy in testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee about new Justice Department initiatives: “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty; my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists.” Similarly, in a November 2005 speech to the American Enterprise Institute, Vice President Cheney questioned the trustworthiness of opposition members of Congress: “What I will again say is dishonest and reprehensible is the suggestion by some U. S. Senators that the President of the United States or any member of his administration purposely misled the American people on pre-war intelligence.” And in an American Legion speech in August 2006, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld linked opponents of the war with the misguided appeasers of Hitler: “That is important in any long struggle or long war, where any kind of moral or intellectual confusion about who and what is right or wrong, can weaken the ability of free societies to persevere.”

Leaders use superiority appeals to argue that the country and their actions embody high moral principles, and that in contrast our enemies are immoral and evil. We frequently compare ourselves to other individuals and groups and insist that we are better in important ways—in our accomplishments, or our character, or our destiny. To reinforce our positive self-appraisal, at times we focus on what we consider worst about others, which serves to further reinforce our view of their inferiority. Not surprisingly, then, leaders pursuing a war agenda routinely elevate and flatter the public they seek to persuade.

The Bush administration regularly sought to link Americans’ pride in themselves and in their country with the pursuit of victory in Iraq. In November 2006 Vice President Cheney offered this analysis: “No weapon in the arsenals of the world is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today’s world do not have. It is a weapon that we as Americans do have. Armed with that courage, and confident in the ideals that gave life to America itself, we go forward to serve and to guard the greatest nation on Earth.” As difficulties in Iraq became increasingly apparent the following year, President Bush addressed the nation this way: “In these dangerous times, the United States is blessed to have extraordinary and selfless men and women willing to step forward and defend us. These young Americans understand that our cause in Iraq is noble and necessary—and that the advance of freedom is the calling of our time.”

Superiority appeals contrasting “us” with “them” were also prominently employed to weaken resistance at home to the war. More than a year before the invasion of Iraq, President Bush was already emphasizing the moral gulf between the United States and its adversaries. Describing North Korea, Iran,

and Iraq in his 2002 State of the Union address, he explained, “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” Shortly thereafter, in North Carolina the president offered an even broader statement in remarks about citizen preparedness: “I really, truly view this is a conflict between good and evil. And there really isn’t much middle ground—like none. The people we fight are evil people. They have no regard for human life.” Reminders of this core premise continued throughout the Iraq War. For example, in discussing a report on Iraqi civilian casualties during a press conference, President Bush angrily stated, “It’s unacceptable to think that there’s any kind of comparison between the behavior of the United States of America and the action of Islamic extremists who kill innocent women and children to achieve an objective.”

Lastly, in regard to helplessness appeals, leaders emphasize that they will persevere and succeed regardless of any obstacles in their path, and that if setbacks do occur, they were unavoidable and therefore not cause for blame. Despair and resignation can overwhelm our commitment and motivation to work toward achieving personal or collective goals. Most of the time we resist the notion that our actions are futile or that adversity cannot be overcome. Such issues can prove especially important in matters as profound and consequential as military conflict. War proponents therefore often give public assurances of ultimate success, while also calling for persistence in the face of obstacles.

In announcing the invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003, President Bush told a national television audience, “My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail.” Six weeks later, standing on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* off the coast of San Diego with a “Mission Accomplished” banner behind him, Bush announced, “Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.”

Even though the war in Iraq in fact continued throughout his entire second term, the president’s emphasis on prevailing did not waver. In an address to the nation in December 2005, he claimed, “My fellow citizens: Not only can we win the war in Iraq, we are winning the war in Iraq.” A few months later in a speech in Cleveland, President Bush offered this exhortation: “Americans have never retreated in the face of thugs and assassins, and we will not begin now.” The following week, discussing possible new approaches to the war in Iraq in a meeting with senior defense officials at the Pentagon, the president announced, “I’ve heard some ideas that would lead to defeat, and I reject those ideas—ideas such as leaving before the job is done.”

But appeals to helplessness can also be used in a very different way—to deflect blame for key failures. During the Iraq War, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld repeatedly took this approach. During one town hall meeting with troops

in Kuwait in December 2004, he explained, “You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time” and “[y]ou can have all the armor in the world on a tank and a tank can be blown up.” Six months later the Defense Secretary offered this analysis: “It isn’t a mistake. It’s just reality. . . . They’re perfectly willing to take a suicide vest and go in and kill innocent people, and anyone who wants to kill people tend to get away with it. They can kill people if they’re willing to give up their own lives.”

It is important to recognize that opponents of military action are rarely passive victims of attempts to galvanize public support for war. In the case of the Iraq War, there was significant opposition before the invasion and throughout the occupation. But war-hungry leaders often have the upper hand given their positions of prominence, their influence over the mainstream media, and the intrinsic psychological power of the five core concerns themselves. Nevertheless, there is value in briefly considering the counter-appeals that can be offered—and that were offered during the Iraq War. Although they did not prevent massive destruction and bloodshed, in all likelihood dissenting voices contributed to increasingly broad dissatisfaction over time with the war agenda among the U.S. public, fully apparent by the end of George Bush’s presidency.

In regard to vulnerability, even when our fears are aroused, we should consider whether the actual evidence of imminent danger is strong and whether the merits of the proposed actions are clear. In the case of Iraq, strong counter-appeals were made arguing that the use of military force was making us less safe—by multiplying our enemies, draining our resources, placing our soldiers unnecessarily in harm’s way, and distracting us from other pressing security concerns.

Turning to injustice, even when stirred to anger, careful analysis of right and wrong should lead us to question whether a cause is truly legitimate, whether the proposed remedy is effective, and whether the ends justify the means. In regard to Iraq, strong counter-appeals were made arguing that the invasion was a profound injustice in its own right because it targeted those not to blame for the events of 9/11, and because it destroyed hundreds of thousands of innocent lives in the process.

As for distrust, we should be cautious in accepting the presumed dishonesty of our “enemies” as a sufficient basis for extreme action, and we should remain receptive to voices of doubt and dissent. In the case of Iraq, strong counter-appeals were made arguing that the invasion was an excessive response to uncertain suspicions and that opportunities for diplomacy and negotiations were unnecessarily short-circuited.

As for superiority, we should always question overly simple claims that our truth is the only truth and that war represents the moral high ground.

In regard to Iraq, strong counter-appeals were made arguing that unilateral aggression did not represent the best of American values and instead served to tarnish our image and influence in the world beyond our borders.

Finally, turning to helplessness, we should carefully evaluate all claims of military capability, we should require clear evidence of success, and we should hold our leaders accountable for their failures. In the case of Iraq, strong counter-appeals were made arguing that false claims of accomplishment were not evidence of toughness under fire, but instead reflected a refusal to acknowledge reality and an unwillingness to correct mistakes.

Since our core concerns about vulnerability, injustice, distrust, superiority, and helplessness are soft targets for proponents of war, the appeals described here will undoubtedly continue to be used by those pushing for military “solutions.” The Bush administration’s selling of the Iraq War is but one entry in a very long and sad historical record. This is not to say that these appeals are always or intrinsically illegitimate. The degree to which they are well founded must be judged based on specific circumstances, but their inherent ring of truth often makes them powerfully persuasive regardless of their merit. Longer term, the promotion of critical thinking skills and greater respect for alternative perspectives will therefore be crucial in helping us collectively make wiser and more ethical decisions in matters of war and peace.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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