Imagine That: The Gender of War Rhetoric and Conceptual Complications

Meg Barboza
St. John Fisher College, mbarboza_no@sjfc.edu
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Abstract
Although it will go without saying at least two paragraphs into this essay, the basis of my argument is both linguistic and social. In this paper I examine how the ways in which humans use language affects the way they conceive of war, particularly how their perception of war reinforces ideas about the male gender and how that gender communicates. Before I jump into analysis, historical precedent or theory, I feel it best to lay the linguistic groundwork.

Essentially, the linguistic basis of my argument purports that if there is even a grain of truth to the linguistic conditions of communication and understanding outlined in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, then Western culture’s (specifically the US) use of war rhetoric both reflects and reinforces ideas about the male gender’s communication style; specifically that this communication style is characterized by action, and in the case of war, physical and armed conflict. What becomes particularly difficult about this communicative style is that, although war rhetoric may be reflect and be delivered as the communicative style of one gender, it eventually affects how all people come to understand war. I argue that, by changing the way we talk about war, we can make a giant leap towards changing the way we conceptualize war and eventually how we use war. This move away from a dependence on war as a mode of political response opens up new possibilities for political responses, specifically responses that do not rely on violence or destruction to communicate.
Imagine That:
The Gender of War Rhetoric and Conceptual Complications
by Meg Barboza

We're all linked together like a chain reaction...
-The Beastie Boys, “Remote Control”

Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...
-John Lennon, “Imagine”

Although it will go without saying at least two paragraphs into this essay, the basis of my argument is both linguistic and social. In this paper I examine how the ways in which humans use language affects the way they conceive of war, particularly how their perception of war reinforces ideas about the male gender and how that gender communicates. Before I jump into analysis, historical precedent or theory, I feel it best to lay the linguistic groundwork.

Essentially, the linguistic basis of my argument purports that if there is even a grain of truth to the linguistic conditions of communication and understanding outlined in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, then Western culture’s (specifically the U.S.) use of war rhetoric both reflects and reinforces ideas about the male gender’s communication style; specifically that this communication style is characterized by action, and in the case of war, physical and armed conflict. What becomes particularly difficult about this communicative style is that, although war rhetoric may be reflect and be delivered as the communicative style of one gender, it eventually affects how all people come to understand war. I argue that, by changing the way we talk about war, we can make a giant leap towards changing the way we conceptualize war and eventually how we use war. This move away from a dependence on war as a mode of political response opens up new possibilities for political responses, specifically responses that do not rely on violence or destruction to communicate.

To accept the arguments I make about gender and the male gender’s communicative style as it relates to war rhetoric, one must first accept and understand the argument that human conceptual systems are shaped by language. One must accept the idea that language uses humans as much as humans use language. This may be a particularly difficult pill to swallow as humans are used to the idea that they have dominion over everything, language included. However, I argue that our experience is not separate from our use of language. Our language serves not merely to categorize and enhance experience but also to shape experience as it occurs. Thus, language and experience exist in a cyclical relationship where each both leads and follows the other.

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone... but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... the

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2 For the purposes of this paper, I define war rhetoric as any rhetoric produced that deals with, reflects, or examines ideas about war. The examples I use are from both U.S. Presidents and government officials, usually in speech form.
"real world" is, to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.

(Edward Sapir)

We cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language... we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organisation and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

(Benjamin Lee Whorf)

The above quotes by popular and controversial linguistic theorists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf are familiar to scholars of linguistics. Together, their theories about language and the way humans use language form the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Sapir and Whorf hypothesise that language and thought are inseparable; that one relies on the other to survive. Whereas most believe the processes involved with language used to be wholly reliant on thought and experience, Sapir and Whorf argue that the processes involved with thought and experience are just as reliant on language.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis itself divides into two categories; the portion most helpful to our discussion on gender and war rhetoric is that of linguistic determinism. Linguistic determinism states that language determines the way we think and experience the world around us. If Sapir and Whorf are correct, and language does determine how we think and experience concepts, or more importantly if language is our primary vehicle for understanding experience, then certainly the rhetoric of war determines how any public conceives of war holistically.

Some decades later, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson take the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis a step further. Lakoff and Johnson claim that, not only are our systems of reality and conception dependent upon language but on one specific aspect of language, namely metaphors. In their groundbreaking book, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphors are not merely conventions of language but actually the building blocks of our conceptual system. They argue that our conceptual systems are largely metaphorical in nature and that this affects our everyday experience profoundly. As metaphors function to create a similarity between two things, which are not actually similar, our conceptual systems, then, become saturated with relationships that have no actual similarity.

Lakoff and Johnson’s argument that our experiences with everyday life are dependent on metaphor—either for translation or for mere understanding—has been tremendously influential. Concerning the concept of *argument*, Lakoff and Johnson state, “Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of” (Lakoff & Johnson 5). They go on to say that “We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things” (Lakoff & Johnson 5).

Lakoff and Johnson’s theories underline the dual nature of language—that language is both a measure of understanding as well as the way we understand—and how this duality affects our experience. One specific example of this phenomenon Lakoff and Johnson examine is the way in which we conceptualize and therefore experience arguments. They claim that we conceive of arguments as war, essentially, that argument equals war. Consider the word *argument*. Linguistically speaking, nothing about the word argument suggests a connection with war. In none of the many definitions of the
word argument are any of the qualities of war mentioned. Argument is primarily defined as “a discussion in which disagreement is expressed; a debate” (www.dictionary.com). Nowhere in this definition is the idea of “open, armed, often prolonged conflict” implied, which is how the word war is primarily defined (www.dictionary.com). Therefore, no natural basis exists for statements often associated with argument that implies war.

Despite this linguistic curiosity, statements that invoke the violent “open, armed conflict” idea are often applied to describe argumentative practices. Statements such as “I demolished his argument” or “He shot down all my arguments” or “His criticisms are right on target” or “Your claims are indefensible” (Lakoff & Johnson 4). English professor Dr. Lisa Jadwin has also commented on this phenomenon in her study of conquest metaphors in rhetoric entitled “Argument as Conquest: Rhetoric and Rape.” Jadwin says “While we may not kill our opponents, our rhetoric implies that at some level we enjoy humiliating them, silencing them, keeping them off the streets of academe and out of trouble” (Jadwin 134). Clearly, a pattern emerges in argumentative practice that reveals a proclivity towards a power asymmetry where the success of one comes at the defeat of another.

Thus, we can see that our conception of argument is informed by our ideas of war and the power asymmetries associated with war. We superimpose the concept and processes of war onto our concept and processes of argument. This practice drastically affects the processes of argument and, in effect, turns argument into a process of war, which naturally assumes an asymmetrical power dynamic. Thus, in the process of argument, participants cannot conceive of a shared power dynamic. There can be no equal distribution of power amongst participants as war sets up a relationship where the power of one naturally negates the power of the other. This metaphorical relationship then ultimately affects both how we argue and how we understand the concepts and processes of argument, changing what could be an exercise in compromise and concession into one of destruction and annihilation. The end result is completely singular. The final solution is limited to the needs and desires of one participant. Such a model for argumentative practice is clearly flawed as it resists the processes of adaptation and accommodation, processes which would otherwise bring about an agreement that meets the needs of both parties rather than just one. The end result of these processes is compromise rather than conquest.

Again, these power asymmetries are partially structured by and definitely evidenced in our language regarding argument. The prominent ideas are of surrender and defeat rather than compromise. These concepts are vital to our understanding of how language works to form public perception of war. Just as our rhetoric regarding argument creates metaphorical (but not necessarily natural) connections between war and argument, so also does our language about war itself reflect and create ideas about the male gender’s relation to violence. Language works with gender and war in much the way it works with war and argument. Our concept of war is both shaped by ideas of gender and shapes ideas about gender. Much in the way we superimpose our conceptions of war onto our concept of argument, so also do we align ideas about masculinity (or more appropriately, standards of masculinity) with violence.

It may now be helpful to set forth the conditions in which rhetoric itself occurs. In the introduction to his study of Presidential
Crisis Rhetoric and the Press in the Post-Cold War World, Jim A. Kuypers chooses to define rhetoric as Bitzer defines it. The resulting definition of a rhetorical situation is:

A complex of persons, events, objects, and relations, presenting an actual or potential exigency which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigency. (Kuypers 3)

Kuypers makes the connection between the presidency and rhetoric by saying that "many communication scholars view the modern presidency as a rhetorical presidency" (Kuypers 4). Kuypers goes on to justify this claim on three grounds, the most important of which is that "the president sets goals and provides solutions for the nation's problems." From this, Kuypers concludes, "...what a president or his representatives say, then, is a text" (Kuypers 5). In his definition of crisis rhetoric, Kuypers says that crisis rhetoric occurs when a president chooses to speak on an issue, whether to promote it as a crisis or downplay its perceived significance as a crisis. Thus, presidents act to control the definition of international events. The President acts to define the context through which the event is viewed (Kuypers 7).

Kuypers goes on to say that "Utterances in response to crisis situations (or the perception thereof) are historically mandated and culturally based" (Kuypers 8).

Using Kuypers’ claims as justification, one is now able to examine the language of presidential war rhetoric much in the way one would examine the language of The Declaration of Independence to better understand the ways in which a national representative chooses to define the mission and role a nation will occupy. Thus, by examining the rhetoric President George W. Bush produces regarding the “War on Terrorism,” one can better understand how Bush defines the role of the U.S., a role that reveals much about national priorities and how the nation chooses to communicate.

One point that it is important to bear in mind is that point made earlier by Kuypers when he stated that the modern presidency is a rhetorical presidency and furthermore, that “the President acts to define the context through which the event is viewed” (Kuypers 7). In his continuing discussion on the role of the President in crisis rhetoric, Kuypers states:

Crisis rhetoric is a rhetoric that excludes discussion. It reserves epistemic questions for the president alone. According to Windt, so long as the crisis is not one of a military attack upon the United States, it is to be considered a “political event rhetorically created by the president” (Kuypers 17).

This last statement is crucial to our discussion on President George W. Bush’s rhetoric regarding the September 11th bombings and the “War on Terrorism” that followed. If we rely on Kuypers and Windt’s claims to examine Bush’s statements regarding the September 11th bombings, we will see that America’s “War on Terrorism” is a war rhetorically invented by President Bush. In other words, all the prerequisites for war (such as an official declaration of war or comparable statement, for example) are completely absent from the September 11th situation, but are later applied in the rhetoric President Bush uses...
to inform the American people of the nation’s response to the situation.

Thus, classifying the terrorist bombings as “acts of war” is not only misleading but also completely false. As Windt and Kuypers claim that so long as the crisis is not one of a military attack upon the United States, it is to be considered a political event rhetorically created by the president, and as the terrorist attacks were not accompanied by an official declaration of war, they were not “acts of war,” which is the term President Bush consistently uses to describe the September 11th attacks (Bush 9/19/2001).

With these gestures, we see President Bush relying on the nation’s inability (or in some cases, the nation’s unwillingness) to appropriately differentiate between that which is war and that which is unnecessary violence. The difference seems somewhat inconsequential and to a certain extent, the lack of such differentiation is due to a habitual referencing of war even when such metaphors are wholly inappropriate. The U.S. has a long history of using war metaphors even when such metaphors are wholly inappropriate. Some examples of this phenomenon include America’s “War on Drugs,” “War on Poverty,” or the “War on AIDS.”

What these phrases indicate about our nation is that, when presented with an obstacle, our first and only response is that of annihilation. Rather than indicating that our priority is to understand and prevent, our use of the word war indicates that we are prepared to eliminate. This is why the struggle to dissolve poverty in the U.S. is billed as a “War on Poverty,” rather than “An Effort to Understand and Prevent the Perpetuation of Poverty in the U.S.” Our national rhetoric defines our response mechanism as violent and primarily concerned with elimination rather than understanding. In effect, our nation has come to occupy the role of the bumbling character of old western films that shoots first and asks questions later.

These definitions of the terrorist attacks as “acts of war” are at the least confining, as the very definition of war requires open and armed conflict to be part of the response. These definitions both reflect and create what Kuypers calls “consummatory discourse.” Consummatory discourse is “illocutionary in nature; it demands, it seeks to effect change or induce action” (Kuypers 20). Thus, because President Bush wrongly classifies the terrorist attacks as “acts of war,” he creates a consummatory discourse that adamantly demands open and armed conflict to be the response. Simultaneously, Bush’s comments reflect the definition of such discourse because his remarks seek to “effect change or induce action” (Kuypers 20). What we finally have is a war invented completely through the use of words.

Bearing in mind Kuypers’ claim that the role of the president (and by extension, his rhetoric) is to “define the context through which the event is viewed,” a close look at Bush’s rhetoric reveals a national definition that demands the response be violent and, through metaphor, aligns such violence with masculinity (Kuypers 7). Thus, by using rhetoric that advocates violence as an appropriate political response, and furthermore, by using rhetoric that relies heavily on male-oriented metaphors, masculinity and violence become inextricably linked. This connection is particularly dangerous in a society as androcentric as ours. As we now have a firm grasp of the linguistic and rhetorical complexities of war rhetoric, it is now appropriate to examine how the rhetoric of

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3 Androcentrism that is evidenced in the foundational Declaration of Independence, for example, which makes use of male pronouns to represent all national citizens.
war is gendered and the implications of such a process.

The frequent connection between the processes of war and traditional male gender roles makes the practice of war distinctly male in origin. This is both detrimental to how we conceive of war (or rather, how we cannot conceive of any alternative) and how we conceive of gender. Not only does war and the violence associated with it become overwhelmingly masculine through this association, but masculinity becomes equally dependent on ideas of violence, such as those associated with war. This is especially problematic when the act of war becomes apparent rather than abstract. A nation pays heavy penalties for its reliance on war as a means of negotiation and also pays incalculable penalties for associating masculinity with war.

Not only does war become the final cause but also the final male cause leaving the male gender with few possibilities for communication aside from violence. In her introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, Deborah Cameron (editor) highlights this same problem for the female gender saying:

There are also elaborate restrictions on women in certain communities. This does not render women unable to speak at all, but it does compel them to resort to circumlocution... [T]here is certain hostility towards women engaging in certain linguistic practices. There is still, for example, a widespread unease about women using obscene language. (Cameron 4)

Here, Cameron has effectively highlighted the conflict between acceptable gender linguistic practices and the need for adequate expression. Much in the way Cameron argues that women's lack of access to certain aspects of language forces the female gender to resort “circumlocution,” I argue that male’s lack of access to communication devoid of violent action limits the male gender’s freedom to communicate. In the case of war rhetoric, these restrictions have serious and widespread consequences as male oriented war rhetoric speaks for an entire nation, not just one person or one gender.

Indeed, this is the primary focus of my argument—the all too frequent connections between the violence of war and masculinity levy enormous penalties for both men and the society the male oriented war rhetoric represents or reprimands. What is essential to understand when examining the connections between war rhetoric and masculinity is that the act of war itself is used as a form of communication, evidenced most obviously in the Rochester, NY based *R News*’ coverage of the “War on Terrorism” entitled “America Responds.” The idea that war is a response or form of communication is obvious in this network’s use of the word “respond” to describe the physical combat of war.

Thus, war becomes part of a dialogue between nations. In the case of America’s “War on Terrorism,” war is being used in place of more meditative avenues of conflict resolution, such as those found in the United Nations or the International Court of Justice. As the United Nations is “to be considered as an international legal person,” it is possible that those responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11th could be criminally prosecuted in a court of law (www.encyclopedia.com). This practice isolates and punishes those persons primarily responsible for the attacks, forcing only those persons to pay for their crime. This practice would eliminate the destruction that war brings to the nation of the people who are responsible. From this point, I argue that the rhetoric surrounding America’s “War on Terrorism” and the
avenue of resolution itself (armed conflict) indicates a disdain for resolution that favors less violence and a more evenly balanced power dynamic. Furthermore, I argue that the connections between the male gender and the act of war are apparent in this rhetoric, indicating that such tendencies towards violence and asymmetrical power relationships are closely aligned (and in some cases, definitive of) masculinity and the male gender.

One text that has greatly helped establish an historical precedent for the connections between masculinity and war is Kristin L. Hoganson’s study of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars entitled Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. In this book, Hoganson claims, “The political pressure to assume a manly posture and appear to espouse manly policies gave gender beliefs the power to affect political decision making” (Hoganson 4). Much in the way Hoganson investigates how these manly policies and postures brought the U.S. to war at the turn of the 20th century, I will investigate how the war rhetoric of America’s “War on Terrorism” assumes many of these same manly policies and postures.

Nowhere are these masculine postures more apparent than in President George W. Bush’s speeches to the nation. Just four days after the September 11th attacks, in his radio address to the nation, President Bush announced plans for a “comprehensive assault on terrorism” which he said would not be a “token act” (Bush 9/15/2001). Bush goes on to say, “Our response must be sweeping, sustained, and effective.” Here Bush sets up the rules of this new war: take no prisoners (sweeping and effective), and carry on as long as it takes (sustained).

Later in the speech, Bush says that the perpetrators of these crimes will “... be exposed, and they will discover what others in the past have learned: Those who make war against the United States have chosen their own destruction” (Bush 9/15/2001). On September 20th, President Bush elaborated on this statement by saying that the terrorists are:

The heirs of all the murderous ideologies in and of the 20th century...they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies (Bush 9/20/2001).

Here Bush invokes a national strength that should be recognized throughout the world. In his words, war against the U.S. is a mistake—the U.S. is so strong and so powerful that rising up against the U.S. is a self signed death warrant. To back his assertions up, Bush states that others, too, have learned this lesson. Here, Bush clearly defines the U.S. as a warring nation; a nation with a history of defeating its enemies through armed conflict rather than victimless resolution. Later in the address, Bush again pinpoints national courage as physical when he says, “Over the past few days, we have learned much about American courage—the courage of firefighters and police officers who suffered so great a loss, the courage of passengers aboard United 93 who may well have fought with the highjackers” (Bush 9/15/2001). Clearly, in these statements, physical sacrifice is linked to courage and heroism.

As one might expect from previous statements, Bush claims that freedom must be maintained through violent action. In his September 16th remarks regarding the new war, Bush makes this policy of maintenance through violence obvious when he says, “It is time for us to win the first war of the 21st century decisively, so that our children and
grandchildren can live peacefully into the 21st century” (Bush 9/16/2001). Bush’s comments line up nicely with Hoganson’s observations of the impending Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars when she says, “Those who spoke of national struggle and national survival generally believed that these depended on powerful men who did not shirk arduous challenges” (Hoganson 12).

Further along in her study of the gendered rhetoric surrounding these wars, Hoganson claims:

Bellicose constituents wrote their congressmen to demand that they defend the “NATION’S HONOR.” Like-minded-congressmen maintained that “sometimes, a nation in defense of its honor and integrity must go to war.” Jingoes argued that those who wanted to settle the conflict through arbitration had no understanding of honor, that they were not “true men”(Hoganson 16).

Bush makes a similar connection between honor and war when he remarks, “We’re a nation of resolve. We’re a nation that can’t be cowed by evildoers. We will call together freedom and freedom loving people to fight terrorism” (Bush 9/16/2001). A day earlier, Bush pinned resolution to action by saying, “…we will respond accordingly…we’re going to act” (Bush 9/15/2001).

The idea that honor must be maintained through the action of defense is especially prevalent in American Politics. Hoganson comments on this by saying:

Men associated manly honor with valor, particularly in exacting revenge on their enemies. Honor represented men’s status and entitlement in a male hierarchy. Men of honor were convinced that, come what may, they must defend their reputation and manhood…men’s honor involved a demonstration of self-worth before the public (Hoganson 24).

In several of his speeches, Bush makes similar gestures. In his September 15th remarks, President Bush touches upon the ideas of honor and revenge saying “Behind the sadness and the exhaustion, there is a desire by the American people for revenge” (Bush 9/15/2001). This specific statement had its roots in another statement made by Bush just two days earlier, on September 13th. Then Bush claimed, “Justice demands that those who helped or harbored the terrorists be punished—and punished severely” (Bush 9/13/2001). Bush’s most revealing statement to this effect came on September 20th when he proclaimed that the nation’s “…grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution” (Bush 9/20/2001). Finally, Bush addressed the U.S. military saying, “The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud” (Bush 9/20/2001).

In statements like these, President Bush clearly makes a connection between bravery and action, between war and heroism, between physical sacrifice and valor. These ideas jibe with linguist Deborah Tannen’s claim that “Research on gender and language has consistently found male speakers to be competitive and more likely to engage in conflict” (Tannen 274). Here Tannen is referring specifically to patterns in the male gender’s linguistic style, which can be seen in Bush’s commands that “…we will do whatever it takes,” or that “…this government, working with Congress, is going to seize the moment,” or Bush’s

4 This excerpt is found in Deborah Cameron’s The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader in a piece by Tannen entitled The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance.
assertion that “America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time” (Bush 9/11, 15, 19/2001). Furthermore, Tannen’s claims also apply to Bush’s willingness (and by extension, the nation’s willingness) to use armed conflict as a communicative response; a response that differs wildly from arbitration, for example, which does not utilize violence to reach an agreement.

In addition, Hoganson says that war is regarded as preferable to dishonor because dishonor is a “precursor to national decay” (Hoganson 40). Hoganson backs up her claim by quoting Rep. Joseph Wheeler, an Alabama Democrat, when he said, “Unless the world believes we are ready and willing, able and determined, to sustain our convictions, our policies, and our principles by force and by the sword, we must lose the prestige we have so long enjoyed and drop from the high place of the first nation on earth (Hoganson 40).

As one can plainly see from Bush’s September 15th comments, modern times have done little to wear away at such ideas. Somehow, honor—something that also implies superiority, as one can see from Wheeler’s references to “prestige” and “high place of first nation on earth”—must be maintained through violence. In fact, it seems that violence is the only way to maintain such honor and prestige, as Wheeler calls it. At the risk of presenting a history that has not changed much in a century, it is nevertheless extremely important to note that ideas advocating violence as an appropriate political response has historical precedent. Thus, with historical precedent, Bush’s statements do not stand alone; the sample is not idiosyncratic, so to speak.

The idea of physicality and physical strength are enormously present in Bush’s speeches regarding the nation’s response to terrorism. In his September 11th Address to the Nation, Bush calls American resolve “steel,” equating spiritual presence to physical reality. This idea surfaces again in an October 12-14, 2001 issue of USA Weekend which features the photograph of a large, muscular man, dressed in business casual attire, bearing a red, white and blue ribbon on his right breast. Here not only is the nation’s strength equated with physical strength, but more importantly, the nation’s emotional or spiritual strength is equated with male physical strength.

Another connection between male strength and violence can be found in Hoganson’s chapter “McKinley’s Backbone: The Coercive Power of Gender in Political Debate.” Here Hoganson includes a political cartoon from the Chicago Chronicle. The cartoon features the character of Uncle Sam giving President McKinley a “backbone,” which is actually a long rifle. Again, the connections between violence and masculinity are clear. Without weaponry or physical strength, men are not strong. Similarly, without weaponry or physical strength, the nation is not strong. Keeping this in mind, it is no surprise that the President (as the voice of the nation) subscribes to such ideas about masculinity’s relation to violence, so as to avoid presenting the nation as un-masculine. Bush, himself, has his own peculiar metaphor for the physicality of war rhetoric. For this, Bush chooses to invoke an especially masculine and violent type of sport, that of hunting.

In his discussion about the Johnson administration’s Vietnam War rhetoric, Robert L. Ivie examines the administration’s use of metaphors. Ivie contends that, in regards to the Vietnam “conflict,” the Johnson administration made an enormous mistake in using feminine metaphors. Ivie says:
Their collective struggle to articulate a compelling motive for the war, however, became hopelessly entangled in a self-neutralizing cluster of images that emphasized “containment” of communist aggression over giving “birth” to a free Vietnam—a hierarchy of terms that weakened recurrent appeals to standing “firm, taking ‘risks,’” and defeating a “savage opponent” (Ivie 122).

Ivie points out the importance of metaphor in war rhetoric by saying that such conflicting metaphors “prevented the Johnson administration from developing the metaphor of containment into a sufficiently persuasive definition of the Vietnamese situation” (Ivie 122).

Ivie’s claims indicate that violent or forceful masculine metaphors would produce a “sufficiently persuasive definition” whereas less violent metaphors—such as birthing metaphors, which are undeniably feminine—would not produce the effect. Thus, Ivie’s claims support the idea that the public responds to masculine metaphors of strength and defeat rather than feminine metaphors of birthing, a system of metaphors that imply a nurturing rather than destructive relationship.

Ivie also argues that the administration’s lack of metaphor savvy prevented the war from being properly presented and assessed. Ivie cites Kenneth Burke at this point saying, “Burke’s bi-directional model of metaphor’s relationship to motive highlights the impact of terministic incongruities on the organizing principle of a rhetor’s master image” (Ivie 122).

What Ivie makes manifest in these statements is the importance of metaphors to war rhetoric, and more specifically. Ivie’s claims highlight the need for a “master image” that is both sufficiently violent and overwhelmingly masculine. When examining President Bush’s metaphors regarding the “War on Terrorism,” one will find both these qualities enormously present.

What is important about Ivie’s and Kuyper’s claims is that each suggests that an official’s comments regarding a crisis situation serves to “set the tone” and, in effect, determine how the public views a crisis (Ivie 19). This means that what President Bush says—the metaphors he uses, the relationships he makes, the roles he establishes—all translate to his audience (the American people) and become part of their understanding of the war and those we are at war with. The symbols and signs that Bush uses to interpret and evaluate roles, motivations and relationships involved in the “War on Terrorism” become the symbols and signs the American public uses to interpret and evaluate the roles, motivations and relationships involved in the “War on Terrorism.”

Thus, when using his hunting metaphor to define the nation’s role in the “War on Terrorism,” Bush’s statements shape the public’s ideas both about the nation and our enemies. The public begins to understand itself (the role of the nation, the national identity) in these terms: a violent hunter who will stop at nothing to apprehend its prey. With his hunting metaphors Bush sets up a relationship where the U.S. is a master hunter, and the terrorists who the U.S. seek to destroy are animals without a corner of the world to hide in. This process often lures the public into a false sense of identity and also a false sense of security as the absolute and polarized roles resist the fact that war, to a certain extent, is built upon a series of victories and defeats for both sides.

In five separate speeches, President Bush uses this metaphor of hunting. The first reference to hunting is rather nebulous and actually refers to the U.S. but is nevertheless a reference to the game of hunting and pursuit. In this particular speech, Bush
claims, “These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat” (Bush 9/11/2001). Here, the idea of retreat for the U.S. is impossible; we will not retreat, we will pursue. These statements fall in line with the hunting metaphor that Bush would later adopt. Bush follows up on this metaphor four days later in a press conference where addressed multiple questions when he says “…we will find those who did it; we will smoke them out of their holes; we will get them running” (Bush 9/15/2001).

Here, we see Bush setting up a metaphorical relationship where the U.S. is a skillful hunter, and the all too nebulous terrorists are burrowing animals. This idea comes up again a few lines later when Bush promises to deal with “…those who harbor them and feed them and house them,” as though such nations or people are feeding a rabid stray (Bush 9/15/2001). In this same session, Bush claims that Osama bin Laden is a “prime suspect” and that “…if he thinks he can hide and run from the United States and our allies, he will be sorely mistaken” (Bush 9/15/2001).

Not only is Bush creative in setting up this hunter/animal relationship, he is also consistent. On September 16th, Bush accused the terrorists of “burrowing into our society,” following that statement up with a promise to “…get them running and to hunt them down.” Later in the press conference, Bush uses the hunting metaphor again saying that Pakistani leader, President Pervez Musharraf (whom he never names), has agreed to “…aid our nation to hunt down, to find, to smoke out of their holes the terrorist organization that is the prime suspect.” Bush follows up this statement with a promise to get the terrorists who “hide in caves.”

Finally, on September 20th, Bush invoked the hunter metaphor again when he said the U.S. will “…starve the terrorists of funding, turn them against one another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism” (Bush 9/20/2001). Again, the ideas of pursuit, retreat, and hiding are the prevalent metaphors by which Bush defines the conditions of the “War on Terrorism.” The cumulative effect of these statements is to establish absolute and polarized roles, which reduce one member (the Taliban fighters, for example) and exalt another (the U.S. military or the U.S. as a nation). The roles are far too easy and ignore all the gray areas and complexities inherent in human relationships. It is never a case of one or the other, and yet, Bush is able to lure the public into separating themselves from their enemies; a process that justifies the death and destruction of war and eats away at the idea that each person, as members of a global community with responsibilities to each other, are connected. Clearly this is detrimental to the growth of all nations as it places each in constant competition rather than cooperation.

However, hunting metaphors and violence are not the only terms on which the “War on Terrorism” is defined. Although a less obvious category, that of provision is also part of the male influenced war rhetoric. In this sense, the privilege of fighting gives way to the privilege of provision. Thus, the American military’s mission is two-fold. The first goal is to destroy the enemy and the second goal is to assuage those who weren’t destroyed. As one will see upon closer examination of this phenomenon, the right to provision is simply another way to establish absolute and polarized roles.

The privilege of provision assumes an asymmetrical power dynamic as well, where one is in a more powerful position because it can provide. Furthermore, this provisionary aspect adds to the nation’s understanding of the enemy by presenting a situation where
the enemy is even more evil for not taking care of their own people. This effect only serves to justify the war effort. Another curious effect of this provisional aspect is that this mode of provision comes to hinge on paternity, thereby establishing yet another role for the U.S., which is distinctly male, that of father. One can clearly see this effect in President Bush’s statements regarding the “War on Terrorism” and former President (then senator) John F. Kennedy’s 1956 statements regarding Vietnam.

When Kennedy called Vietnam, America’s “offspring,” he was clearly establishing a provisional, highly parental relationship between the U.S. and the very nation whose people and countryside the U.S. would later ravage in war. Of Vietnam, Kennedy also remarked “We cannot abandon it. We cannot ignore its needs” (Ivie 139). Current President Bush makes similar gestures in certain speeches where he calls for humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. In an October 11th speech, President Bush asked the children of America to “…join in a special effort to help the children of Afghanistan” (Bush 10/11/01). He went on to describe the mission by saying “Their country has been through a great deal of war and suffering. Many children there are starving and are severely malnourished. … We can, and we must help them” (Bush 10/11/01).

Later in the speech, Bush called the humanitarian effort “…one of the best weapons, one of the truest weapons that we have against terrorism” (Bush 10/11/01). In a similar speech delivered the next night at the March of Dimes Volunteer Leadership Conference, Bush claims that the Afgahn’s suffering “…provides us with a task” (Bush 10/12/2001). He continues to elaborate on this cause, claiming that Americans are “…the most generous people on earth. … I know we need to lend a hand to the children who live (in) a place halfway around the world from here” (10/12/2001).

One might be utterly mystified by this mix of destruction and rehabilitation in Bush’s war rhetoric. Toward the end of his 10/12/2001 speech, Bush illuminates on how war and humanitarian efforts fit together. Bush says:

By embracing Afghan children, we assert the American ideal. Our nation is the greatest force for good in the world history. We value the lives and rights of all people. …Americans are determined to fight for our security, no question about it. And we’re equally determined to live up to our principles (10/12/2001).

Bush’s strategy with these statements is to assign more blame to the terrorists and present the humanitarian mission as another way to right the wrong, as the “good” that Bush mentions in his October 12th speech also refers to the war effort itself. With this rather complex identity, violence and provision are aligned and both are used as weapons.

As one might expect, this phenomenon is not purely a modern invention, and the creation of a similar double tiered identity is also evidenced in past presidential war rhetoric. Kristin Hoganson calls this phenomenon “chivalry,” and the preservation or restoration of it was vibrant in the U.S.’s dealings with Cuba at the turn of the century. In Hoganson’s opinion, the nineteenth-century appeal in Cuba was the restoration of American chivalry. Furthermore, Hoganson claims that U.S. motivations for involvement in Cuba’s struggle for independence were spurred on by chivalric intentions. She cites Michael Hunt and Amy Kaplan’s research on U.S. foreign policy and romance novels, saying, “Both find that nineteenth-century Americans often viewed Cubans
metaphorically, as a maiden longing to be rescued by a gallant knight” (Hoganson 44).

For the purposes of the war in Afghanistan, the roles have become the U.S. as the gallant knight, and the Afghani people as the maiden longing to be rescued. This effect is achieved wholly through rhetoric, as one can plainly see by examining Bush’s assertion that “we can and must help them” (Bush 10/11/2001). Bush presents the Afghani people as victims who are suffering and in need of rescue, further justifying the violence of war. In essence, he presents a completely binary situation where one party is good (the U.S.) and one party is bad (the oppressive Afghani government).

Hoganson claims that similar rhetorical posturing occurred in nineteenth century U.S. politics, when the U.S. became involved in the Cuban struggle for independence. She says, “According to the conventions of chivalric novels, only a fiend would deny such heroic men that which they so valiantly struggled to attain” (Hoganson 49). She goes on to say that the criminalization of the Spaniards was done primarily through simple name calling, and common role establishment. Hoganson says, “If the shocking stories of starved and butchered civilians that frequently appeared in pro-Cuban newspapers left any doubts about the Spaniards’ chivalry, stories that depicted the Spanish soldiers as sexual predators worked to put these doubts to rest” (Hoganson 49). Similarly, the metaphors that revolve around hunting and provision are role establishment and name-calling. If Hoganson’s comments sound eerily familiar, it is probably because Bush has also effectively set up polarized roles for the U.S. and Afghanistan. As early as September 12th, Bush was establishing these roles by calling the terrorists “faceless cowards,” and “evil doers,” or “enemies of freedom” (Bush 9/13, 16, 19, 20/2001). In contrast to this, Bush classifies those who are not terrorists as “civilized,” as he does on September 15th when he calls the attacks an “...assault not just against the United States, but against civilization” (Bush 9/15/2001).

To further analyze the connection between male physical power and war, it may be helpful to look at how women are portrayed in wartime. Compare the active, masculine ideas of war we have already discussed to the cover story of US magazine’s October 15th, 2001 issue, which features First Lady Laura Bush as “Comforter-In-Chief.” Where President George W. Bush is depicted in a typically masculine role as commander in chief, his wife Laura Bush is depicted in a typically feminine role, that of comforter. The article, authored by Nina Burleigh, states that Laura Bush has

...transformed her image from the behind-the-scenes presidential wife...to the nation’s comforter in chief. In numerous public appearances, she has managed to express grief with dignity and convey an impression of resilience at the same time (Burleigh 28).

The article discusses Bush’s female status as being almost antithetical to the qualities of resilience and strength her husband exhibits. Where her husband is frequently associated with the words: resolve, courage, and strength, Laura Bush is associated with words like “sadness, feelings, and hugging” (Burleigh 30). First Lady Laura Bush is associated with feelings and emotions rather than action. Clearly, her role in the “War on Terrorism” is much different from that of her husband. For example, the US magazine calls Laura Bush a “behind-the-scenes-presidential-wife,” and later calls her the

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5 A division Bush made startlingly clear when he uttered the unforgettable dictum, “Either you are with us or you are against us.”
“steadying hand behind her husband when he visited burn victims from the Pentagon” (Burleigh 28, 31). Instead of being directly involved with the war effort, Laura Bush occupies the role of supporter, a role made startlingly female by her parallel role as “comforter.” What Laura Bush should then do is be a comforting mother for the nation rather than an active woman, addressing issues of political relevance.

Laura Bush’s role as “Comforter-In-Chief” is in line with Deborah Tannen’s claims that “Research on gender and language has consistently found...females to be cooperative and more likely to avoid conflict (for example, by agreeing, supporting, and making suggestions rather than commands)” (Tannen 274). Burleigh’s comments support Deborah Tannen’s assertions when they say that Laura Bush’s role is “…helping America through the present crisis” (Burleigh 29). Helping through, rather than leading through, is the role Laura Bush must occupy.

In these instances, the portrayal of Laura Bush agrees with Hoganson’s assertion that, historically, women are frequently cast as “non partisan political muses” (Burleigh 34). With Laura Bush safe in her role as Comforter-In-Chief, her husband is free to promote his more masculine, aggressive agenda. In comparison, Laura Bush will concentrate her efforts on “...her primary focus, which remains promoting education” (Burleigh 32).

On the official White House web page (www.whitehouse.gov), the polarization of men and women’s roles during wartime is quite obvious. A search to see what the president is talking about yields numerous speeches, which discuss the politics of war. A search to see what the first lady is talking about yields a holiday greeting, two letters (to elementary, middle, and high school students regarding the events of September 11th), as well as news on Mrs. Bush’s education initiatives. Despite the fact that Laura and George Bush occupy different offices, there is absolutely no reason why Laura Bush should not address the war the way her husband does. Nothing prevents her, say, from discussing the roots of oppression established by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Nothing prevents her from delivering speeches on the effect of the September 11th bombings on the American way of life; which her husband does on October 23rd, 2001, for example.

Several things become troublesome about this apparent gender polarization. First, and perhaps most importantly, war rhetoric—aside from being distinctly male—is detrimental to the growth of a nation, especially to the growth beyond the use of war as a communicative response. Secondly, the overwhelming amount of masculinity inherent in war rhetoric serves to align the male gender with such violence, especially the use of physical violence and destruction as a mode of communication. This eventually oppresses not only the male gender, but also the millions of men and women for whom this male oriented rhetoric comes to represent. There can be no end in sight to the problems we all incur when communication becomes limited by the construction of a template for political response that represents only one particular gender.

Thus, by utilizing gendered rhetoric, a nation cannot be represented holistically. In the case of national and international politics, a more comprehensive style must be adopted, one which bridges the gap between typical male communicative responses (violence, action, asymmetrical power dynamics) and typical female communicative responses (compromise, verbal rather than physical communication, shared power dynamics). In the sticky web

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6 Emphasis mine.
of gender-complications can be found a more complete, model of political communication. The lack of such a model seriously limits a nation’s effectiveness in dealing with the more subtle and ticklish issues associated with war.

Ticklish issues such as the destruction of civilian lives and neighborhoods, the exhaustion of resources, the endless supply of human and economic currency war consumes, as well as the general breakdown of a world view that relies on the interconnectedness of all people, a breakdown that the most carefully planned attack cannot help but contribute to. Through war, one not only destroys enemies but also physical realities and actual lives. In addition, one destroys all the religious, social, ethical and humanitarian ideologies that exist to prevent us from destroying one another. As Elaine Scarry says in her study of pain and language, The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World:

When Berlin is bombed, when Dresden is burned, there is a deconstruction not only of a particular ideology but of the primary evidence of the capacity for self-extension itself: one does not in bombing Berlin destroy only objects, gestures and thoughts that are culturally stipulated but objects, gestures, and thoughts that are human, not Dresden buildings or German architecture but human shelter (Scarry 61).

Scarry’s assertions highlight the task that is awaiting the children of the late 20th and 21st centuries. The task is to eliminate the rhetoric that establishes and supports the blatant power asymmetries and destruction that are natural to war, regardless of what gender they have their origins in. To change the way we conceptualize and engage in war, we have to change the way we talk about war. A wide variety of solutions to this problem exist. In a Village Voice online piece, Rachel Naumann relates several anti-war philosophies that maintain the dignity America seems to quick to self-acknowledge, and the lack of violence it should so desperately seek. Robin D.G. Kelley, NYU history professor and coauthor of Three Strikes, has an answer: “Rather than beat up a whole nation, we could identify and isolate those directly responsible and bring them to trial and, as we should have done with the Confederate South, make them liable for damages by seizing assets” (Kelley).

War through peace. Imagine that.

Works Cited


