GOD

WILLING?

POLITICAL FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE WHITE HOUSE,
THE 'WAR ON TERROR' AND THE ECHOING PRESS

DAVID DOMKE

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Preface

This book is an analysis of the inter-connections among politics, religion, public discourse, and the press in the United States. This book also is a critique of the Bush administration's disregard for democracy in the months following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It was the former before it became the latter.

In January 2002 I began working with several graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Washington on a series of research projects examining the Bush administration's strategic communications after September 11. For the past decade I have analyzed how U.S. political leaders and news media shape public opinion, and this period promised to offer rich insights. President George W. Bush had captured the rhetorical high ground in his address to Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001, in which he painted the world in stark good versus evil terms, declared that other nations either would be with the administration in a "war on terrorism" or against them, and asserted confidently that "freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them." Congress and much of the mainstream U.S. news media responded with deference and support. The president and administration seemingly had offered a compelling vision *of* the nation and *for* the nation; with this in mind, in our research we set out to identify and systematically track any communication strategies that had been prominently utilized in this process. A substantial public emphasis by the administration on themes of national identity and a clever approach of preempting potential criticisms of the "war on terrorism" emerged in our analysis, and this research eventually produced a series of articles in academic journals.

Over time, however, as this research continued through 2002 and 2003, something else began to emerge in the analysis. It became apparent to me that the president and administration's vision was more than strategically nationalistic and politically adroit. It also was religious. The administration's public discourse consistently:

- exhibited an antipathy toward complex conceptions of reality
- framed demands for immediate action on administration policies as part of the nation's "calling" and "mission" against terrorism
- issued declarations about the will of God for the United States and the values of freedom and liberty, and
- demonstrated an intolerance for dissent.

The combination of these communication themes with the religious conservativism of President Bush, Attorney General John Ashcroft, and others in the administration pointed in one direction—that of fundamentalism. Indeed, scholarship and commentary on religious fundamentalisms consistently highlight these kinds of beliefs and actions or present a picture wholly suggestive of them. I gradually became convinced that the administration, in making its case for war against a terrorist network headed by Islamic extremists, had capitalized upon the September 11 crisis to put forward its own blend of conservative religion and politics, what I call in this book political fundamentalism.

But that is not the end of the story. Analysis of this worldview emanating from the White House and its effects upon U.S. political and media systems between September 2001 and the president's calling of an end to "major combat" in Iraq in May 2003 left me with one conclusion: the administration's political fundamentalism subverted many of the country's most precious democratic ideals. The president and his team consistently utilized communication approaches that merged a conservative religious worldview and political ambition in pursuit of controlling public discourse, pressuring Congress (and the United Nations) to rubber stamp its policies, engendering a view of its actions as divinely ordained, and stifling dissent. The result was a dominance of the political agenda unmatched in recent American history. Just as important, at no time did the administration's public communications suggest an openness to consideration of whether the nation's policies might have contributed to the September 11 attacks or to the possibility that other Americans—or international allies—might effectively contribute to the shaping of the nation's response or subsequent campaign against terrorism. The administration did what it wanted, when it wanted, without concern for others—and its public communications were a key component of making this form of leadership attractive or at least palatable to a citizenry reeling from the trauma of September 11.

The administration had help in this process. Mainstream news media in the United States responded to the terrorist attacks with a predictable nationalism, predictable because a commercial press always has responded to externally initiated national crises by standing in line with political leadership (its sources) and advertisers (its financial benefactors). What *was* surprising is that such a deferential posture by the news media toward the administration rarely waned over the 20 months of analysis in this book: the mainstream press consistently echoed the administration's communications from September 11 to Saddam and Iraq—thereby disseminating, reinforcing, and embedding the administration's fundamentalist worldview and helping to keep at bay Congress and any serious questioning among much of the public. Even in press criticisms of the administration, which were present during this period, the administration's communication emphases resounded.

At the same time, Democrats in Congress also bear responsibility for the course of events because of their consistent acquiescence to the administration's rhetoric and demands. Had leading Democrats been able to articulate a compelling alternative moral vision for the nation, regularly asked tough questions of the administration, or at least insisted upon appropriate deliberations about some of the administration's post-September 11 policies, their views might have received substantial airing by news media and resonated with a considerable portion of the American public. But the administration's political fundamentalism was so certain, so determined, and so unrelenting that the mainstream press and Democrats in Congress abdicated their responsibilities as key checkpoints in American democracy—to the enormous detriment of the nation and the world.

This book, then, is about politics, religion, public discourse, and the press in the United States as it played out under the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11. It is unfortunately the case that there will be a desire by some to dismiss this book as the product of an anti-religious, anti-conservative mindset. The reality could not be farther from the truth. My worldview, and that of a number of the individuals who assisted me on this project or offered insightful suggestions, has been and continues to be substantially shaped by the Christian faith. Further, I see great merit in both conservative and liberal thinking. This research was driven by one and only one agenda: a desire to rigorously examine the public communications and to understand

the motives of George W. Bush and his administration in this momentous period in U.S. history. Political elites and news media have special, leading roles in the U.S. experiment in democracy, and it is always important to scrutinize how that power is being exercised. Whether the actions of the Bush administration, Congress, and the mainstream press in the period between September 11 and the Iraq war in spring 2003 were anomalous or indicative of a permanent shift in the relations among these institutions is unclear. I do know for certain, though, that what did happen during this time period had far-reaching implications for the nation and the globe. This book is an attempt to understand these developments and to contribute toward a democratic future, for the benefit of my students who have worked with me and for the current and future students who will teach us in the future.

Acknowledgments

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At Pluto Press, my editor Julie Stoll helped me to see the deeper import of my analysis, and worked with me to move the project from its original fit for an academic audience to one (I hope) that contributes to scholarship and broader public discourse.

Two people in particular deserve additional mention. Kevin Coe and Robert Tynes provided tireless assistance on this project. They discussed ideas, combed through scholarship and popular discourse, analyzed administration communications and news coverage, offered insightful suggestions, read draft after draft, and did all of this on a timeline that fit my schedule. I am most grateful.

I am responsible for the ideas, data, and conclusions in this book, of course.

Finally, I am fortunate to have had the support of Lisa and William, who helped me simultaneously to grasp the importance of this project and consistently to gain much-needed perspective on just how important anything is.

1
Religion, politics, and the Bush administration

President George W. Bush delivered the 2003 State of the Union address before Congress and an estimated U.S. television audience of 62 million, emphasizing goals and accomplishments of his administration as well as challenges posed by terrorism and other perceived threats. In particular, Bush devoted just over half of the address to the administration's "war on terrorism" and the need to confront Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Near the end, the president turned to discussion of the national character of the United States and its purpose in the world, declaring that "Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity." He then added, "We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know—we do not claim to know all the ways of providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history. May He guide us now" (Bush, 2003a).

Four days later on the morning of February 1, the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded, killing all seven crewmembers. The president spoke to the nation from the White House that afternoon. Included in his comments were these words:

> In the skies today we saw destruction and tragedy. Yet farther than we can see, there is comfort and hope. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry hosts one by one and calls them each by name. Because of His great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing." The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls

we mourn today. The crew of the shuttle *Columbia* did not
return safely to earth. Yet we can pray that all are safely home.

<div align="right">(Bush, 2003f)</div>

The explicitly religious language in these two addresses, in combina-
tion with the administration's push for war in the Holy Land-rich
Middle East, prompted a spate of popular analyses of Bush's religious
faith. *Newsweek* magazine devoted its March 10 cover to "Bush and
God," the *Washington Post* took up the topic with stories and
columns,[1] and *New York Times* columnists and guest writers weighed
in.[2] In August, *Vanity Fair* contributed "God and man in the White
House,"[3] and in September *Gentlemen's Quarterly* offered "George
W.'s personal Jesus".[4] These writers and publications were of mixed
mind regarding how much Bush's religious faith infused his politics
and how it accorded with previous presidencies. It was clear, though,
that this president's faith, and the implications of that faith for
administration policy and global relations, had become a matter of
considerable public interest. Bush's religious outlook was no longer
merely a personal or even political matter; it had now been absorbed
into the discourse of popular culture.

The argument here is that Bush's overtly religious language, what
religion scholar Martin E. Marty termed "God talk" in one of the
Newsweek articles,[5] was only part of the story. The much more
important and far less obvious matter was that the administration
had converged a religious fundamentalist worldview with a political
language to create a *political fundamentalism* that offered familiar-
ity, comfort, and a palatable moral vision to the U.S. public in the
aftermath of September 11. This book offers a definition of political
fundamentalism and then examines its application by the Bush
administration and the response of mainstream U.S. news media,
focusing on the period between the 2001 terrorist attacks and major
combat in the Iraq war in spring 2003.

One indication of the remarkable success of the Bush administra-
tion in this endeavor was the presidential images that served to book-
end the 20 months analyzed here. On the evening of September 11,
2001, Bush was relatively unpopular for a first-year president, faced
a skeptical, anxious, and confused public, and delivered a somber
address from the Oval Office. On May 1, 2003, the president was
riding high in public approval, had headed the nation through two
military campaigns, and delivered a "Mission Accomplished" address

with pomp and full regalia from the deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier. Indeed, in April 2003 a full 80 percent of the U.S. public said that the president "is a strong and decisive leader" (Gallup, 2003)—an all-time high in the polling organization's measure of this trait.[6]

The leadership of Bush and the administration came with a significant price, however. Absent during the months from September 11 to the Iraq war in 2003 was a robust public discussion about the meaning of the terrorist attacks and the direction of the nation in its aftermath. The administration's political fundamentalism did much more than offer familiarity, comfort, and a moral stance; it also closed off a substantive societal—and international—conversation through a set of politically calculated, religiously grounded communication strategies. Instead of opening up the discourse and allowing a democratic dialogue to take place, Bush's rhetoric hijacked the discussion about the significance and implications of September 11, thereby denying to U.S. citizens important opportunities for national self-examination and a wide public hearing of diverse viewpoints — and also shutting out the world, much of which was extending unprecedented sympathy for U.S. citizens and the nation. Democracy was disregarded as the administration emphasized language and policies that limited potential avenues of political and social action, pushed incessantly for immediate adoption of administration policies by consistently raising the specter of another September 11, declared that U.S.-defined freedom and liberty were unchallengeable God-decreed norms for all peoples, and consistently silenced dissent by proclaiming it to be un-American and dangerous.

These administration communication approaches, in the midst and then aftermath of the September 11 crisis and substantially amplified by mainstream news media, effectively controlled public discourse and engendered a climate of nationalism in which the public treated presidential support as a patriotic duty and Congress felt compelled to adopt far-reaching domestic and foreign policies. Policies enacted between September 11 and spring 2003 included the U.S.A. Patriot Act, several economic recourses to a widely felt recession, the new Cabinet post of the Department of Homeland Security, a preemptive foreign policy doctrine, and the decision to apply this doctrine against Iraq—all of which occurred with far less public debate among political leaders, both in the White House and on Capitol Hill, than the nation deserved. The administration had created a national mood

of spiritual superiority under the guise of a just sovereignty. It was a moral stance underpinned by threat, fear, and paranoia, and carried the connotations of the apocalypse; that is, of course, if Bush's prescriptions for deliverance were not followed. The ultimate irony is that in combating the Islamic extremists responsible for September 11, the administration adopted, pursued, and engendered its own brand of political fundamentalism—one that, while clearly tailored to a modern democracy, nonetheless functioned ideologically in a manner similar to the version offered by the terrorists.

This book examines several domains of the U.S. political and news environments closely to understand these developments. The public's surge of support following the September 11 attacks, what political scientists have termed "rally round the flag" behavior, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain the president and administration's remarkable political successes in late 2001, throughout 2002, and early 2003.[7] The president was given the opportunity to lead by the public and Congress, clearly; but he need look no further than his father's experiences in the early 1990s to know that his public standing would ultimately depend upon his ability to offer a resonant agenda in a convincing manner. For Bush the son to be successful, he would have to transform into a rhetorically compelling leader *and* he would need a nationalistic news media to widely amplify his message to the U.S. public. To be specific, the administration had to fashion and then set into motion what political scientist W. Lance Bennett has described as "propaganda, American style" (1988, p. 176), wherein the public is fed simple, stereotypical ideas from politicians via uncritical television and newspaper media—with the result that the public becomes either passive to or accepting of the message. The historical record suggests that Bush delivered and the mainstream press obliged.

This book focuses on how this occurred and what it means for the United States generally, and the U.S. political system in particular. The central argument is that the Bush administration offered a message ideally suited and strategically crafted for the times, one that leading news outlets consistently conveyed to a mass audience. Capitalizing upon the post-September 11 anomic state felt by many U.S. residents, the president and his administration brought a conservative religious worldview into the mainstream of U.S. politics. Religious worldviews, Rottenberg (2000) has argued, offer a "comprehensive faith-inspired vision about the nature of things and the meaning of history"

(p. 403) that guides the establishment of norms, decision-making and behavior.[8] The Bush administration's worldview is one grounded in religious fundamentalism—that is, it emphasizes absolutes, authority and tradition, and a divine hand in history and upon the United States.[9] Such a worldview is disastrous for a democratic political system, for it mandates an ideological shift away from open discussion, publicly responsive leadership, and humility, toward authoritarianism, publicly unmindful leadership, and arrogance. All of these were present in the Bush administration after September 11.

It is necessary to acknowledge, though, that worldviews are not easily identified. They are often unconscious in nature and articulated by people in language that rarely sheds clear light on one's foundational values and assumptions about reality. Lakoff (1996) has argued:

> [M]any people believe that they are consciously aware of their own worldviews and that all one has to do to find out about people's views of the world is to ask them. Perhaps the most fundamental result of cognitive science is that this is not true. What people will tell you about their worldview does not necessarily accurately reflect how they reason, how they categorize, how they speak, and how they act.
>
> (Lakoff, 1996, p. 36)

For this reason, research on political worldviews must establish clear criteria about what counts as evidence; Lakoff suggested analyses should be able to offer a unifying explanation for why and how individuals focus on certain topics and use certain words and phrases in arguing about these topics, and then should test this explanation by analyzing these individuals' communications because every "speech or book or article is a challenge to any would-be description" of a worldview (p. 30). This is the approach adopted here. The arguments offered about the administration's political fundamentalism are examined through systematic analysis of the public communications of the president and top administration officials (speeches, press conferences, congressional testimony, and so on) regarding several policies and goals between September 11, 2001, and the president's calling of an end to major U.S. combat operations in Iraq on May 1, 2003. In turn, to gain insight into how these communications disseminated and whether they ultimately

were influential, news and editorial discourse of leading news organizations and public opinion polls are examined at several points during the same 20-month window.

MODERN POLITICAL FUNDAMENTALISM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Political fundamentalism is offered and defined here as an intertwining of conservative religious faith, politics, and strategic communication. It is conceptualized as consistent with, yet substantially distinct in societal implication from, civil religion—what Bellah (1974) defined as "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things" that "while not antithetical to, and indeed sharing much in common with, Christianity, was neither sectarian or in any specific sense Christian" (p. 29).[10]

A common example of civil religion discourse in U.S. politics is the "God bless America" phrase that presidents have used to conclude national public addresses. Such language is present in the Bush administration, but so are several additional discourses that are far less common among U.S. political leaders and are suggestive of the central role that religion—conservative religious faith, to be exact—has served in this administration. Political fundamentalism also is of much greater strategic import than a basic presence of religious fundamentalism in U.S. politics, which, in the form of the "Christian Right" over recent decades, has drawn considerable national attention and strongly infused the Republican Party with a socially conservative agenda.[11] This movement has labored, however, to successfully broaden its message into a political fundamentalism—that is, to convert a self-proclaimed Christian rectitude, via strategic language choices and communication approaches, into righteous political beliefs.

The Bush administration achieved such an adaptation following September 11, transforming a religious paradigm into a political one *by choosing language and communication approaches that were structurally grounded in a conservative religious outlook but were political in content and application*. Insight into this process can be gained by drawing upon the concept of "structures of feeling," offered by cultural theorist Raymond Williams as a way to understand how meanings and values become embedded in social, political, economic, and cultural environs over time. Williams emphasized

that social and political leaders' abilities to shape the "specific feelings, specific rhythms" experienced on a daily basis by individuals is crucial to the process by which certain ideologies become "formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations" (1977, p. 132). The result of the Bush administration's policy and communication processes after September 11 was the formation of a worldview emanating from the White House that had deep and conservative religious roots yet felt political—and thus became more likely to be received favorably in the press and by the U.S. public. This is what is meant here by political fundamentalism.

It would be a mistake to think about political fundamentalism only in regard to the Bush administration, however. Political fundamentalism in a modern form has both a recent, albeit nascent, past and a likely future in the United States.[12] The dramatic social changes and turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s prompted a number of U.S. residents to turn to the stability offered by fundamentalist churches and doctrines, bringing conservative Christianity into the "cultural mainstream" by the mid-1970s.[13] At the same time, religious conservatives began to engage in substantive political action to address perceived declines in traditional morality and the nation's potential abdication of its role, in fundamentalists' view, as "the 'city on a hill' ordained by God as the light to the nations" (Ammerman, 1991, p. 40). Indeed, since it was founded, a conception of the United States as a "chosen nation" has been present among many Protestants.[14] In 1976, however, religious conservatives gained a new sense of political efficacy when devout Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter was elected to the White House. Concerted political organizing followed, and by the early 1980s the new Christian Right, as the movement became known, had created "a sophisticated political operation that was far more extensive and effective than any of its predecessors" (Lienesch, 1993, p. 7).

At the center of this movement was the Moral Majority, an organization developed by three conservative political organizers and headed by fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell.[15] The Moral Majority's agenda focused on family-related issues, particularly abortion, prayer in schools, and matters of sexuality and gender roles, including staunch opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment for women. In time, fundamentalists began to develop a network of pastors, churches, television programs, newsletters, and seminars that generated considerable revenue, while also spreading and reinforcing a

renewed engagement by Christian conservatives in politics.[16] The Christian Right eventually opposed Carter over a number of matters, particularly his foreign policies. Falwell argued, for example, that the dissemination of Christianity to other peoples could not be carried out if other nations were communist—a perspective which provided a good reason to support a strong U.S. military and conservative foreign policy.[17] In this context, Ronald Reagan emerged as the favorite son of religious conservatives. Reagan offered the mix of conservative social and foreign policies desired by fundamentalist leaders—in particular, opposition to abortion, support for school prayer, and a conception of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire"—and he exhibited open enthusiasm for Christian conservatives, to whom he said in 1980, "I endorse you" (quoted in Sawyer, 1984).[18] Indeed, Reagan gave federal appointments to several leaders of the religious right.[19]

Just as important, the Reagan administration developed a language and set of communication strategies, under the leadership of Michael Deaver and David Gergen, that appealed simultaneously to fundamentalists and to a broader mass public. In the words of Ritter and Henry (1992), "the union between the sacred and the secular … defined Reagan's public discourse" (p. 4). In particular, the president's tendency to paint the world in stark good versus evil terms, with the United States as the divinely chosen defender of freedom and liberty—a language that, as we will see, was closely paralleled by George W. Bush in the aftermath of September 11—helped Reagan gain the support of religious conservatives. Indeed, Falwell told Moral Majority members that they could "vote for the Reagan of their choice".[20] The network of religious conservatives began to coalesce in these years with a broader group of conservatives, which gave rise to widespread conservative talk radio and a significant interconnected association of think tanks and grass roots political organizing.[21] By the end of the 1980s, according to Lienesch (1993), the new Christian Right exercised power via "a labyrinth of lobbying groups and political action committees" (p. 3). This convergence of politics and religious conservatism within and during the Reagan administration might be considered the birth of a successful, modern form of political fundamentalism in the United States.

The presidencies of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton took different pathways, however. From the beginning, religious conservatives were skeptical of Bush, so much so that he was

challenged in the Republican Party primaries by Christian Right leaders Pat Robertson in 1988 and Pat Buchanan in 1992. Bush governed more moderately than Reagan—even raising taxes—and his support for fundamentalists' core concerns was conceived as lukewarm and tenuous.[22] Clinton was opposed by political conservatives generally, and staunchly so by religious conservatives, who immediately assailed his decision upon entering office to repeal the ban on homosexuals serving in the military. By the 1990s the Moral Majority had given way to the Christian Coalition, which had broader public support and a more sophisticated communication approach.[23] Religious conservatives were generally less politically visible during these years than in the 1980s, but nonetheless continued to grow in importance, spreading well beyond the Southeastern United States to pervade institutionalized arenas of politics. When Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives in 1994, close to 60 percent of victorious congressional candidates received Christian Coalition backing.[24] The Christian Coalition subsequently propelled the impeachment process against Clinton,[25] and Conger and Green (2002) concluded, "Christian conservatives ha[d] become a staple of politics nearly everywhere" by the 2000 elections (p. 65).

In particular, religious conservatives had become a staple of the Republican Party. Lind (2001) argues that Christian conservatives formed one of a half dozen groups in Reagan's coalition of public supporters, whereas by 2000 the pre-eminence of religious fundamentalists had "relegated to the sidelines" all other factions in the earlier Reagan coalition.[26] In this environment, George W. Bush—viewed by many in the fold as ideologically not his father's son, but rather Reagan Jr.—became the clear choice of religious conservatives, a viewpoint solidified in the aftermath of September 11.[27] Data by the Pew Research Center (2003i) indicate that in 1987–8, 34 percent of white evangelical Protestants identified as Republicans and 31 percent as Democrats. Over time this gap had widened, and it reached unprecedented levels in summer 2003 when 43 percent of white evangelical Protestants identified as Republican, 22 percent as Democrat. The same partisan movement also was visible among white Catholics. In the late 1980s, 41 percent of such individuals considered themselves Democrats, compared with 24 percent Republicans. This gap shrank over time, and in summer 2003 for the first time more white Catholics identified as Republican (31 percent)

than as Democrats (29 percent), a shift particularly pronounced among those who attend Mass regularly.

These trends toward political conservatism among religious white U.S. residents both contributed to and were reflective of landmark partisan developments among the broader U.S. electorate in the aftermath of September 11—developments that tilted the entire U.S. political landscape to the advantage of the Bush administration and Republican Party. At the national level, in the 2002 elections Republicans, on the strength of Bush's campaigning in many states and a new grass roots organizing approach, gained seats in both houses of Congress—the first time this had happened for a president in midterm elections since 1934—and control of the presidency and both houses of Congress, something that not even the Reagan administration achieved.[28] At the state level, a majority of state legislators are now Republicans for the first time in 50 years, and in spring 2003, almost as many U.S. adults (30 percent) called themselves Republicans as called themselves Democrats (32 percent), the narrowest gap since pollsters began measuring party identification among the public in the 1940s.[29] If the Reagan administration gave birth to a modern form of political fundamentalism, it became ascendant under the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11.[30]

At the same time, fear-inducing terrorism unfortunately and inevitably is likely to occur again (in varying form, of course) in future years in the United States. The world of terrorism has breached the nation's shores and is not likely to be eliminated with certainty anytime soon, if ever—especially given the Bush administration's willingness, which it consistently emphasizes, to act preemptively with military might when diplomatic means do not unfold as desired. It is important, therefore, to situate an analysis of the Bush administration within the context of how political fundamentalism might "work," generally, in the U.S. political and media system. Indeed, it is possible to develop a broader, predictive conceptual framework that asserts that *political fundamentalism is likely to (re)emerge, gain a wide public presentation, and receive a favorable hearing in the United States* when four characteristics are present:

- a nation-challenging crisis occurs
- national political leaders are religiously conservative
- the same political leadership is skilled in strategic communications

• the news media give substantial emphasis to leaders'communications.

The convergence of all four of these provides an environment in which political fundamentalism has the potential for power and influence in the United States. Notably, at least three of these attributes are *not* perceived as the norm—that is, they are not the way things regularly are—in the U.S. political and media systems. Specifically, contemporary U.S. society is thought to be fairly resilient to nation-challenging crises due to (a) its emphasis on individual freedoms, democratic mechanisms, and wide-ranging civil rights, and (b) the lack of an "opposing" nation-state (such as the former Soviet Union) with substantive military resources. Second, because of its secular political system—with its constitutionally inscribed separation of church and state—and a primarily "objective" and secular media system, the United States seems relatively unlikely in times of normalcy to elect or strongly support individuals with highly conservative religious outlooks in the top national office. Third, U.S. elites certainly may be adroit at strategic communications, but a rigorously "on message" political leadership is relatively uncommon, in part because of ambitions among leadership and in part because of the invasive and competitive U.S. media environment.[31] Finally, U.S. mass media are primarily commercial in economic basis, and thus theoretically have great freedom to deviate from the viewpoints of political leadership.[32] These four characteristics nonetheless converged in the post-September 11 milieu and provide an explanatory framework for the political successes of President Bush and his administration between the terrorist attacks and Iraq war. These characteristics are elaborated in the following pages, and then an overview is provided of the analysis in ensuing chapters on ways in which political fundamentalism was enacted by the Bush administration after September 11 and the implications of these developments.

Nation-Challenging Crisis

Marty and Appleby, who edited *The Fundamentalism Project*, a six-volume opus published in the 1990s, argued that "fundamentalisms arise or come to prominence in times of crisis, actual or perceived" (1991b, p. 822). When the world gets turned upside down, when anxiety dispels comfort, when social, economic, political, and

cultural relations are in flux, religious fundamentalism becomes attractive because people seek a familiar framework in which to interpret events. As Ammerman (1991, p. 55) puts it: "In chaotic times and places, when individuals and communities are searching for moorings, the certainty and clarity of fundamentalism often seems appealing." Religious fundamentalisms, therefore, both are spawned and become more manifest and attractive in times of crisis. In the words of Ammerman again (p. 56): "Fundamentalism has been most politically active and culturally visible" in periods of major turmoil and subsequent renewal; the post-September 11 era encompasses both of these. There are all manners of crises, of course; the ones that are the most likely to have the greatest impact—that is, large effects of a lasting nature on many people—are crises that challenge the nation, because these can cut to the core of one's understanding and experience of the world. Specifically, an individual's conception of the nation, what scholars call "national identity," offers a form of collective identification that, in the words of Schlesinger (1991), is simultaneously "one of inclusion that provides a boundary around 'us' and one of exclusion that distinguishes 'us' from 'them'" (p. 301). A significant challenge to such collective boundaries is a necessary first step in the rise of political fundamentalism. When the public faces uncertainty about its national affinity, then the opportunity for significant ideological change or reversion becomes possible. Political leaders are aware of this, of course.

U.S. citizens have become accustomed to *intra*-national challenges such as racial and ethnic conflict, class disputes, religious bickering or worse, partisan political struggles, and so on. As unfortunate as these are, such dynamics might be viewed as more or less inevitable in a liberal democracy, which encourages or at least allows free speech, religious liberty, political protests, and the like. What has become rare for the United States over the past half-decade, and thus is unfamiliar to large segments of the population, is a serious external challenge to the nation-state; when this occurs, a necessary response of political leadership is to re-construct the sense of "imagined community" that—perhaps consciously, perhaps not—holds together disparate citizens.[33] Niebuhr (1967), for example, has argued that each nation has a positive "social myth" that distinguishes it from other nations, justifies its existence, and defends its interests; these myths frame historical events in positive lights and establish a sense of superiority over other nations. Such myths are propagated by

national leaders and through political and cultural institutions such as schools, churches, and the mass media.[34] A defining characteristic of these narratives, almost without exception, is an emphasis upon particular moral qualities as integral to the nation. A nation-challenging crisis, then, prompts a (re)turn to consideration of nationality and morality, both of which predictably intersect with religion for many U.S. residents, thereby providing a pathway for political fundamentalism to be expressed and to be favorably received. For the Reagan administration, a severe economic recession and the Iran hostage situation combined to constitute a considerable crisis; for the current president, the stakes were even higher with the events of September 11.

The terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. presented a crisis of the gravest sort—thousands of U.S. residents dead on U.S. soil, the nation's economic epicenter devastated, and its political capitol imperiled. Even though the large majority of U.S. residents experienced the attacks only indirectly, via media coverage or through the death or injury of someone they knew, the psychological trauma of these events was substantial. In a public opinion survey one week later, 71 percent of U.S. adults said they felt depressed due to the attacks; of these, half said they were having difficulty concentrating on work or normal activities, and one-third indicated they were having trouble sleeping.[35] In a survey two months later, 31 percent of U.S. residents said their "own personal sense of safety and security" had been shaken a good deal or a great amount by the September 11 events, a finding slightly higher among women, people living in the Eastern United States, and those *under* the age of 45.[36] Nearly half also said their hope for the future had changed due to the attacks, and 41 percent said that their stress level had become elevated since September 11. And in a CBS News survey one year after the attacks, 50 percent of U.S. adults said they generally felt "somewhat uneasy" or "under danger" from terrorist attacks, 62 percent said they thought about September 11 at least every week, and a full 90 percent agreed that "Americans will always have to live with the risk of terrorism."[37]

Manifest effects such as these recede over time, of course; however, scholarship in political psychology suggests that such powerful cognitions and emotions can nonetheless be *primed*, that is, brought to mind, by new terrorism-related cues disseminated through the mass media, such as elevated threat levels, U.S. military

campaigns, or even presidential addresses emphasizing concerns about terrorism.[38] These cues prompt the mental (and mass media) replaying of the September 11 events, and it is common in such instances for old fears to be renewed and re-lived. In November 2001, the editorial board of the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted:

> Although studies of prior disasters suggest that stress reactions diminish over time in the vast majority of people who have had indirect exposure, the September 11 attacks, the shocking televised images, and the profound ramifications are unprecedented. It remains to be seen whether stress reactions in people throughout the country will indeed diminish, especially with recurrent triggers from ongoing threats and further attacks.
>
> (Schuster et al., 2001, p. 1511)

Evidence does suggest subsequent events served as recurrent triggers. In October 2001, the percent of U.S. adults who said they were "very worried" that another terrorist attack would soon occur was 27 percent. This number declined in subsequent months, but in June 2002, following public notification that U.S. citizen Jose Padilla had been arrested on allegations that he planned to detonate a radioactive "dirty bomb" and as the president unveiled his proposal for a Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security, this percentage spiked to 32 percent. This number fell into the 'teens in subsequent months before surging to 31 percent in December as U.N. weapons inspectors prepared to enter Iraq. When inspections moved ahead, the U.S. population relaxed, but when the administration's war rhetoric heated up in February 2003, anxiety about another terrorist attack shot up to 34 percent. In a related poll question at the same time, 22 percent said they were "very worried" that a family member might be a victim of a terrorist attack, also a post-September 11 high.[39] Further, in late March 2003 a full 67 percent of U.S. adults said that they felt sad when watching the Iraq war on television and another 58 percent said it was frightening to watch television coverage of the conflict.[40] In sum, for a significant number of U.S. residents the trauma of September 11 waxed and waned, but nonetheless remained through the Iraq war in 2003.

Religiously Conservative Political Leadership

It is tempting for people in the United States to see the close inter-twining of religion and politics as a matter of consequence only for others—such as Arab nations in the Middle East, particular groups and locales in Southeast Asia, or strife-ridden regions in Africa. Of course, religion has often been an integral part of U.S. national poli-tics, from the founders' mix of Christianity and deism, to the late-nineteenth century "Social Gospel," to Christian Temperance moralism in the 1920s and 1930s, to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and to the rise of the Moral Majority and Christ-ian Right in recent decades. Indeed, in a September 2000 poll, 70 percent of U.S. adults agreed it was important "that a president have strong religious beliefs."[41] In short, a person of religious faith has been generally perceived as a good thing in U.S. politics. However, after September 11 George W. Bush offered a religious stripe rarely found in the White House—a staunch Christian conservative who, more than a few suggested, acted with the certainty that "God is on his side."[42] The president often has spoken of his "born-again" faith, and several other key members of the administration hold strong Christian beliefs, including Attorney General John Ashcroft, Commerce Secretary Donald Evans, and National Security Adviser Condaleezza Rice.[43] According to David Frum (2003), who worked as a Bush speechwriter in 2001–2, the presence of overt religiosity in the White House was such that "Bible study was, if not compulsory, not quite *uncompulsory*, either" (p. 4, his emphasis).

Notably, during the buildup to the Iraq war aides consistently claimed that the president's religious groundings did not "dictate policy" in the administration,[44] yet at times the president publicly cast his entire political agenda in a spiritual, particularly Christian, frame-work.[45] Indeed, it would be counter to the tenets of the president's faith for him *not* to ground the administration's policy decisions in his religious outlook. That Bush's politics are founded upon, not merely accompanied by, his faith is the view of many religious conser-vatives. When preparing to run for president in 1999, Bush met with leading pastors in Texas, asked for their prayers, and told them he'd been "called" to seek higher office.[46] During the campaign, when asked who he considered his favorite philosopher, Bush said, "Christ, because he changed my heart," a response that provoked cynicism and criticism among some in the press,[47] but resonated with others of

devout faith.[48] Over time, U.S. religious conservatives so embraced Bush that, a *Washington Post* article opined, Pat Robertson's resignation as head of the Christian Coalition in December 2001 created little stir: "For the first time since religious conservatives became a modern political movement, the president of the United States has become the movement's de facto leader—a status even Ronald Reagan, though admired by religious conservatives, never earned" (Milbank, 2001, p. A-2). And on the eve of the 2004 presidential campaign, Robertson predicted on his *700 Club* television program on the Christian Broadcast Network that Bush would be re-elected in a "blowout" because whatever Bush does, "good or bad, God picks him up because he's a man of prayer and God's blessing him."[49]

What makes all of this important is that it seems almost inevitable that a religiously conservative president—already inclined to see the hand of God in most happenings—and his matching constituency would interpret any nation-challenging crisis occurring on his watch as his *raison d'être*. As a result, such political leaders become likely to view their present station in life as a God-ordained "calling," an outlook that imbues—in their eyes, at least—subsequent policies and actions with a magnitude of moral certainty.[50] As will become clear in this book, considerable evidence suggests that such an interpretation of the September 11 events and subsequent "war on terrorism" took hold among the Bush administration, particularly for the president. For example, in his address to Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001, the president declared:

> Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, *we have found our mission and our moment*. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us.… Fellow citizens, we'll meet violence with patient justice—*assured of the rightness of our cause*, and confident of the victories to come.
>
> (Bush, 2001e, emphasis added)

Such a statement was an example of how the Bush administration adapted a conservative religious foundation—that of a missionary project and righteousness—into a moral and resonant political language that also made clear the administration had little inclination for public debate about these matters. At the heart of this process was

the manner in which a conservative religious worldview structured the administration's public communications—which leads to the lynchpin of the Bush administration's political fundamentalism.

Strategic Political Communications

The presence of a nation-challenging crisis would foster among the U.S. public and governing leaders a swell of support for any administration; further, a religiously conservative administration's interpretation of the conflict as a defining "mission" and "moment" for the nation undoubtedly marked a significant start on a compelling narrative. At the same time, this support would not be offered in perpetuity. Whether an administration—religiously inclined or not—turned it into political capital would be ultimately dependent upon factors considerably of their own making, particularly the ability to engender favorable impressions of their competence, integrity, and vision. Bush's team, therefore, had to find ways to entice and persuade, not alienate. Insight into how they did so can be found in an understanding of the power of language and, in turn, communication. Language, as the primary medium of interchange between humans and reality, serves a constitutive role in shaping how individuals understand their social worlds.[51] Specifically, language, as the building block of all communication, simultaneously reflects various cultural forces while contributing to the relations, identities, and institutions which lie behind those structures. That is, choices about language and forms of communication do not occur merely after people have evaluated the world and wish to communicate about it; rather, language and communication patterns themselves are fundamental to the processes by which humans construct, understand, and act in their social worlds. Our words simultaneously represent and bring into being certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Put simply, language makes us who we are. One's interactions with and experience of intersecting social, political, and cultural relations gain meaning only through language. As a result, we might conceive of all communication about a topic, such as an address by the president, congressional testimony by an administration Cabinet member, or a news story or editorial, as drawing upon and, in some important degree, *constructing*, *reproducing* or *challenging* broader ways of understanding that define, describe, delimit, and circumscribe how a subject is "talked about."[52] That is, all communication

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