Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G. W. Bush’s Iraq War Speeches

Kenneth S. Zagacki

In the process of trying to create identification between Americans and the Iraqis, making them partners in a democratic founding, President G. W. Bush’s Iraq war rhetoric contributed to conditions that were diametrically opposed to democratic transformation. His discourse, grounded in prophetic dualism, created what I refer to as “constitutive” paradoxes that reveal both limitations and reflexive possibilities of constitutive rhetorics.

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In March 2003, responding to what he perceived to be an urgent need to destroy Saddam Hussein’s Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), to unify and democratize the people of Iraq, and to defeat international terrorism, President George W. Bush ordered the military invasion of Iraq, what the White House dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” From late 2002 and well into 2007, he delivered many public speeches in which he justified the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. In these speeches, the President addressed both Americans and Iraqis, inviting them to see the overthrow of Hussein and the ongoing occupation as a founding moment not only in Iraqi but also in Middle Eastern history. According to Maurice Charland (1987), constitutive rhetorics are crucial during “founding” moments when advocates try to “interpellate” or “hail” audiences, calling a common, collective identity into existence. As Charland might say, President Bush as well as administration officials “addressed and so attempted to call into being” a unified and democratic Iraqi ‘people’ (p. 134). The Iraqi people, in turn, would “legitimate the constitution of a sovereign” Iraqi state (p. 134). The President addressed them by employing “prophetic dualism,” a rhetorical frame for interpreting American...
foreign policy that divides the world into the forces of good (exemplified by the United States) and the forces of evil (represented by America’s enemies). As Wander (1984) points out, conflict between these forces can only be “resolved through the total victory of one side over the other” (p. 342). Prophetic dualism holds that Americans are morally and spiritually superior and destined to spread “good” around the globe. To be sure, Americans formed the President’s primary audience; he interpellated them as prophetic dualists. But the effectiveness of Bush’s rhetorical campaign also hinged on the way he articulated subject positions for people living in Iraq through a process of “identification” in the uniquely American prophetic dualist narrative. For Bush, the whole idea of ‘regime change’ presupposed that Iraqis would participate in and secure democratic practices.

By 2005, despite promising elections and the development of an Iraqi political constitution, insurgents intensified their attacks against coalition forces and seemingly uncontrollable ethnic and sectarian violence wracked the nation. As several commentators on the war in Iraq observed, neither the President nor his advisors understood or took into account how the American intervention would unleash ethnic and religious tensions repressed for decades under autocratic rule (Chandrasekaran, 2006; Ricks, 2006; Will, 2006; Woodward, 2006). Washington Post reporter Anthony Shadid (2005) warned that the increasing violence magnified “the sense of U.S. failure in the eyes of most Iraqis . . . and the rest of the world . . . . The carnage itself sent the message of approaching anarchy . . . as if it was understood that Americans could say nothing to mitigate the most recent tragedies or promise anything that would end the violence . . . . Iraq was subsumed in the logic of violence, ruled by men with guns” (p. 426). By the end of 2006, rather than “reconstituting” Iraqis as a unified and democratic ‘people,’ the President’s policy resulted in what the bipartisan Iraq Study Group called a “grave and deteriorating” situation (Baker et al., 2006, p. 6).

My purpose in this article is to investigate President Bush’s Iraq war speeches as failed constitutive rhetoric. My study is guided by three overarching questions: (1) Why did Bush’s speeches fail as constitutive rhetoric? (2) How did these speeches invoke or impose constraints on the American–Iraqi relationship in the form of what I shall call “constitutive paradoxes?” (3) What rhetorical opportunities are afforded by the failure of constitutive rhetoric? I will argue that, in the process of trying to create identification between Americans and Iraqis, making them partners in a democratic founding, Bush’s discourse contributed to the emergence of conditions that were in many ways diametrically opposed to the democratic transformation he was promoting, creating several troubling constitutive paradoxes. The choice of the term “constitutive paradox” stems from the work of Kenneth Burke (1968). Burke writes that many attempts to define audiences as democratic, in effect reconstituting their identities, reveal “the paradox that these doctrines of progress contributed their part to usher in precisely the gloom they thought they were ushering out” (p. 331). In Iraq, as my analysis suggests, President Bush’s rhetoric addressed Americans as givers of democracy and freedom and the people of Iraq as the recipients, a constitution that could only last so long as democratization made progress. More specifically, he addressed an audience of Iraqis that he believed was already consubstantial with
the very identity he sought to call into existence, as if their identity was intrinsic to them, “existed prior to or served as the ‘container’ of their political community” (Charland, 2001, p. 68). In Iraq, however, the views of Shiites and Sunnis, in particular, were already “a rhetorical” or “ideological effect,” as Charland (1987) might put it. These views held more ideological sway with most Iraqis than did the discourse of national identity proposed by Bush, which assumed the existence of a universal desire for democracy. Shiites and Sunnis could not simply be persuaded to shed preexisting views because “social identity, religious faith, sexuality, and ideology is beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion” (Charland, 1987, p. 133). As Charland (1987) suggests, President Bush assumed and presumed the existence of a fundamental collective identity for his audiences, a kind of collective ‘we’. In fact, the collective ‘we’ is a shifting formation: the identity of a reconstituted people, their borders and who counts as members of the new collective people are constantly contested and repositioned (Drzewiecka, 2002). Thus, when democratic progress slowed, in part because Shiites and Sunnis resisted the occupation, President Bush seemed compelled by his own prophetic dualism to intensify the American military and economic commitment. This renewed commitment made the Iraqis more dependent on the United States and expended American resources. But it did not necessarily make the situation better and in some ways made the situation worse (Ricks, 2006; Shadid, 2005). The deepening crisis demanded additional commitments—denying these commitments meant denying the American prophetic dualist identity. According to the Bush administration, withdrawing from Iraq would have enabled America’s ‘evil’ enemies to prevail over the United States and its new Iraqi allies. As one administration official put it, a premature troop withdrawal amounted to “surrender,” “defeat,” and “a death sentence for the millions of Iraqis who voted for . . . a free and democratic society” (quoted in Weisman & Williamson, 2007, p. 3A).

Rhetorical analysis of President Bush’s speeches as failed constitutive rhetoric illustrates two significant points: first, as Judith Butler (1997) suggests, the emergence of a reconstituted and seemingly autonomous identity is rooted in paradox—becoming a subject is intricately bound up with being subjected to power. In Iraq, Bush rhetorically constituted the relationship between Americans and the Iraqis in such a manner that it denied the autonomy requisite for Iraqi self-determination. Moreover, by describing Iraqis as lacking the resources necessary for instituting democracy, his public address called attention to an irresolvable lack. The attempted and repeated fulfillment of this lack contributed to a culture of dependency from which it was (and remains) extremely difficult for the United States to extricate itself. Second, advocates must consider the competing worldviews of various audiences and understand how these identities impede and promote democratic transformation. The contradictions that arise between competing identities and the narratives that constitute them pose a tremendous challenge, especially to foreign policy rhetorics which seek to create founding moments. When Iraqis resisted President Bush’s notion of an Iraqi democratic founding, he defined away the resistance within the confines of a prophetic dualist frame. This prevented him from adjusting or thinking ‘reflexively’ about this resistance and how it could be transformed into a rhetorical and political
As Noon (2004) demonstrates, President Bush’s foreign policy discourse has always characterized the world in a simple, dualistic fashion that actually evades a critical engagement with history and the deeply rooted traditions of other countries. By 2006, this critical evasion (not to mention the escalating violence and lack of overall democratic progress in Iraq) led to rising discontent in the United States, opening what Tate (2006) calls “a rhetorical space” from which opponents in Iraq but also in America could contest the President’s Iraq policy. In the United States, dissenters revised the prophetic dualist identity, although their resistance did not result in an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq or seriously oppose the basic grounds of prophetic dualism.

In what follows, I describe Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric and its extension in the work of Burke and Butler. Next, I rhetorically analyze several of President Bush’s public speeches spanning the period from right before the invasion of Iraq to immediately after the Iraqi constitutional elections in January 2006. This primary selection supplies a fairly broad overview of the President’s public discourse on Iraq. I focus on how Bush’s speeches tried to interpret events in Iraq in prophetic dualist terms. Finally, I investigate the implications of the President’s speeches for the theory of constitutive rhetoric. I attend specifically to what this case study reveals about the constitutive paradoxes and the reflexive invention possibilities of constitutive rhetoric. I suggest how constitutive rhetoric may articulate alternative political identities in the midst of ethnic and religious strife.

Constitutive Rhetoric and Prophetic Dualism

In his study of the “Peuple Quebecois,” Charland (1987) shows how advocates for Quebec’s political sovereignty “addressed and so attempted to call into being a peuple quebecois that would legitimate the constitution of a sovereign Quebec state” (p. 134). Employing what Michael McGee might call Quebec’s rhetoric of a “people,” Charland (1987) argues that claims for Quebec sovereignty based themselves upon the asserted existence of a particular type of subject, the “Quebecois.” That subject and the collectivized “people quebecois” are, in Althusser’s language, “interpellated” as political subjects through a process of identification in rhetorical narratives that “always already” presume the constitution of subjects. (p. 134)

These subjects were not persuaded to support sovereignty; rather, such support “was inherent to the subject position addressed by [presovereignty] rhetoric because of” what Charland (1987) identifies as “a series of narrative ideological effects” (p. 134). The process of constituting a collective subject is the first ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric. The vehicle through which rhetors constitute audiences is narrative. Within the confines of narrative, “the ‘struggles’ and ‘ordeals’ of settlers, as a set of individual acts and experiences, become identified with ‘community,’ a term that here masks or negates tensions and differences between members of any society” (Charland, 1987, p. 140). As Charland (1987) says, narratives offer “consubstantiality”
between one group and even across generations, “between the dead and the living” (p. 140). However, such narratives are problematic because they render “the world of events understandable with respect to a transcendental collective interest that negates individual interests” (Charland, 1987, p. 139). This leads to another ideological effect wherein ancestry is often presented as a concrete link between one group and another. According to Charland (1987), the rhetorical appeal of “ancestry” is that time “is collapsed as narrative identifications” occur and a “collective agent” emerges that “transcends the limitations of individuality at any historical moment and transcends the death of individuals across history” (p. 140). In addition, Charland (1987) argues that constitutive rhetoric inevitably creates the “illusion of freedom” (p. 141), the third ideological effect. Audiences are constrained by the narrative telos of constitutive rhetoric, but situated to believe they have the ability to act freely. Their actions are constrained by the narrative’s boundaries of constitutive rhetoric. The audience, or subject, exists within the framework of the narrative, or context of their narrative history. Subjects are not free to act outside their narrative, for it is the narrative that calls them into being and the “endings of narratives are fixed before the telling” (Charland, 1987, p. 140). According to Charland, constitutive narratives produce their own “totalizing interpretations” because subjects can only act in ways that are consistent with the narrative: “A narrative, once written, offers a logic of meaningful totality” (Charland, 1987, p. 141).

In the case of the Peuple Quebecois, then, rhetorical claims for a sovereign Quebec were “predicated upon the existence of an ideological subject, the ‘Quebecois,’ so constituted that sovereignty was a natural and necessary way of life” (Charland, 1987, p. 137). Charland’s case study represents an example of successful constitutive rhetoric: “‘Canadien francais’” became “‘Quebecois’, an identity permitting claims for a new political order” (Charland, 1987, p. 147). The situation in Iraq, however, demonstrates that not all constitutive rhetorics succeed. Here, rhetorical claims for a sovereign Iraq were based on the existence of a different sort of ideological subject, what Bush labeled the ‘Iraqis’, a nation of citizens who shared the desire for democracy with their American liberators. But not all people living in Iraq could be so constituted—and efforts to address them this way created a series of troubling constitutive paradoxes not considered by Charland. At one level of paradox, Bush used the word “democracy” to designate what the Iraqis were, but he employed a word that actually designated something the Iraqis were not. That is, as Burke (1968) might argue, although utilized by the President to designate a quality or trait “within” the Iraqi people, “intrinsic” to them, democracy was something “outside” the Iraqis and their traditions, “extrinsic” to them or imposed on them by the United States (p. 23). Put differently, for Bush democracy referred to “an attribute of” Iraqi cultural consciousness and history, the background of his audiences’ being. But because democratic traditions (the new context for Iraq’s democracy that supported or underlay it) also existed outside most Iraqis’ cultural/historical horizons, the context was something that Iraqi culture and history was not (Burke, p. 23). Of course, this constitutive paradox always presents “a strategic” moment wherein “transformation” can take place (Burke, p. 24). In this instance, the Iraqis might have become more democratic,
although *their* democracy would have reflected their own cultural/historical conventions and not those of the Americans. As political theorist Noah Feldman (2006) has argued, the desire for democracy is widespread among Muslim believers, much more so than the desire for violent jihad, and Islamists should, therefore, be given a chance to rule themselves.

At another level, the continued effort to stoke this desire for democracy, fashioning it along lines familiar to American audiences, created a constitutive paradox involving subjection, enabling, and resistance. Butler (1997) writes in *The Psychic Life of Power*,

> As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what “one” is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that power is quite another. (pp. 1–2)

Following Foucault, Butler argues that we must see power as forming the subject and not just subordinating or relegating it to a lower order. Power supplies the very condition of the subject’s existence and the future path of its desire. In this sense, power “is what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (Butler, p. 2). In Iraq, as Tate (2006) might explain, the ideology of prophetic dualism became a liberating discourse for many Americans and for some Iraqis. But the rhetoric failed as a constitutive term of collective Iraqi identity: the political purpose and end implied by the narrative of the American founding in President Bush’s discourse redefined democracy according to a restrictive agenda, one imposed from the outside and not particularly attuned to the Iraqi peoples’ unique cultural/historical traditions. If violence may be said to possess a rhetorical dimension, the rhetorical space opened up by this failure empowered Iraqi insurgents to resist coalition and Iraqi government efforts to democratize Iraq, both symbolically and militarily. In other words, Shiites and Sunnis found themselves addressed by a discourse of power seeking to awaken them to the possibilities of becoming autonomous political subjects. Some of them used this autonomy to act democratically, although this made them dependent on the occupiers to make democracy succeed. Other Shiites and Sunnis turned around and exercised their autonomy to resist not only the occupation but each other. In either case, the deployment of American power ‘formed’ Iraqi subjects, as it were—subjecting Iraqis to the occupation on the one hand and emboldening Iraqis to resist the occupation on the other. These developments made it difficult for the United States to achieve its prophetic dualist goals.

**President Bush’s Iraq War Speeches as Constitutive Rhetoric**

Many different groups populate Iraq, including Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Sunni Kurds, Christians, and secularists. Before the American invasion, the factions that would most welcome the United States military remained uncertain. Many prewar planners predicted the Shiite majority would greet the Americans as liberators, especially since Saddam Hussein had severely persecuted them. In the spring of
2002, as support for a war to oust Hussein took shape within the Bush Administration, the State Department and the Department of Defense gathered information and developed their own sets of plans for postwar Iraq. As Rieff (2003) has pointed out, the State Department was of two minds on the subject of Iraq becoming a full-fledged democracy: one was that “liberal democracy would be difficult to achieve” given Iraq’s ethnic and religious diversity and the other that “electoral democracy, were it to emerge, could well be subject to exploitation by anti-American elements” (pp. 31–32). Many foreign policy experts outside of the government voiced similar reservations. Gelb (2005), for example, pointed out that people in Iraq

> put their religious or ethnic identification either first, [as in] “I’m a Kurd and an Iraqi,” “I’m a Sunni and an Iraqi,” or they just say “I’m a Kurd.” This country was never together on its own accord. It was put together by Ottomans, then by the British, and then held together by the brutality of Saddam Hussein.

Gelb, in particular, recognized that Iraqis lacked what Charland placed at the center of his analysis of the peuple Quebecois, an extended rhetoric of national history that would motivate future independence and restoration. As Gelb (2005) makes clear, many Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds really aspired to return to a cultural heritage based more in the premodern past of contested space and divided (though autonomous) identity and politics, rather than to jump into the modern era as a unified democratic state.

According to Rieff (2003), the CIA agreed with these more realistic assessments while the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration and within the Department of Defense consistently asserted “that there was no reason to suppose that Iraq could not become a full-fledged democracy, and relatively quickly and smoothly” (p. 32). On several occasions before and after the invasion, President Bush put the best possible public face on this upbeat neoconservative prediction regarding the possibility of democracy by illustrating how the various ethnic and religious factions living in Iraq could be “unified” as one people, the “Iraqis.” In the following sections, I examine how this constitutive process unfolded along with the constitutive paradoxes and reflexive possibilities they entailed.

**Americans and Iraqis as Prophetic Dualists**

President Bush articulated his prophetic dualist vision for Americans and Iraqis in his October 7, 2002, “Address to the Nation on Iraq from Cincinnati, Ohio” and his January 28, 2003, “State of the Union.” As a way of preparing Americans for the upcoming invasion, he claimed that they had a special role to play in the spread of “freedom” abroad:

> This nation, in world war and in Cold War, has never permitted the brutal and lawless to set history’s course. Now, as before, we will secure our nation, protect our freedom, and help others to find freedom of their own.

The President seemed to be speaking more directly to Iraqi audiences when he noticed how Iraq was “rich in culture, resources, and talent” and how the liberation of Iraq would enable “Iraq’s people... to share in the progress and prosperity of our...
time.” He said that Iraqis would be able to “rebuild their economy, and create the institutions of liberty in a unified Iraq at peace with its neighbors.” In the “State of the Union,” Bush once again framed the upcoming invasion in prophetic dualist terms:

We go forward with confidence, because this call of history has come to the right country. Americans are a resolute people who have risen to every test of our time. Adversity has revealed the character of our country, to the world and to ourselves.

At times in this speech, the President played down the altruistic motives of the United States. He preferred instead to authorize the impending military assault by linking it to Divine Providence: “The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.” Yet Bush emphasized that people (namely, Americans and their democratic allies but soon Iraqis, too) possessed these gifts and the strong but humble desire to share them. As he stated,

The power and appeal of human liberty is felt in every life and every land. And the greatest power of freedom is to overcome hatred and violence and turn the creative gifts of men and women to the pursuits of peace.

President Bush addressed Iraqis more directly in his March 17, 2003, “Address Issuing an Ultimatum to Iraq,” a speech delivered only days before the attack that used virtually the same prophetic dualist language found in his other Iraq war messages. He asserted that “Many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast, and I have a message for them.” The message was that a military campaign would “be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you.” Bush promised that the United States would provide resources necessary for “building” the nascent democracy, including “the food and medicine you need. We will tear down the apparatus of terror and... help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free... The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near.” He once again emphasized how the United States and other free nations had a “duty to defend our people by uniting against the violent... tonight as we have done before, America and its allies accept that responsibility.”

In these messages, Bush drew from prophetic dualism the idea that Americans were especially well-suited to share the “creative gifts” of democracy and freedom. As Domke (2004) has pointed out, the President’s discourse is marked by an evangelist-like promotion of democracy and freedom as universally desired and deserved norms. According to Zizek (2004), the notion of foreign policy as beneficent gift-giving underlies America’s sense of itself as nation destined to spread liberty around the world. If democracy and freedom are “humanity’s true desire, then all that Americans need to do is to give people a chance, liberate them from their imposed constraints, and they will embrace America’s ideological dream.” In Bush’s speeches, prophetic dualism was a tradition part of which the Iraqis were also asked to partake as soon-to-be unified, “liberated” people. By doing so, the Iraqis would, presumably, perform their crucial role, in effect becoming more like their American ‘democratic’ benefactors despite what were tremendous obstacles, not all of which Bush recognized.
That the President believed the American people were uniquely prepared to offer democracy and freedom was evident in light of their history and religious faith: the United States had “defended” oppressed people “before” and was now on the brink of becoming a “gift-giving” agent of God. This reference implied that the invasion of Iraq had the sanction of both God and history. As Wander (1984) explains, prophetic dualism is informed by “Religious faith, moral insight, [and] a respect for the laws of God,” all of which fashion “a set of virtues attributed to the nation which . . . could be called upon not only to explain why those in power deserved to be there, but also why the United States should engage in certain kinds of action abroad” (p. 342). Bush’s version of prophetic dualism contained grounding assumptions about American exceptionalism rooted in religious ideals. According to Wander, in the rhetoric of American foreign policy the United States embodies “Truth, Justice, and Freedom” and was “placed on this earth by a God whose purpose it is to make of it an instrument for extending His spiritual and material blessings to the rest of humanity” (p. 353). In this discourse, Americans are posed as actors “with a sense of purpose, an important mission in a world of nations, and a moral and spiritual center raising [them] above all other” nationalities (p. 353).

Just as important, though, the President tried to identify the Iraqis as prophetic dualists as well, even though they possessed no such tradition from which to draw. Thus he asked Iraqis who listened to (or read about) his speeches to join with Americans in a common conception of nation-building, of a God who conferred the “creative gift” of “liberty” to all people, and of a history that called on Americans and Iraqis to meet their shared destinies. Of course, in Bush’s rhetoric, the Iraqis seemed to have a choice to accept or reject his policy, despite the fact that it was, in reality, imposed on them by military force. Bush framed the decision such that a refusal of democracy and freedom defied Providence and history and, therefore, the very essence of human being. As suggested earlier, for Bush a desire for democracy was intrinsic to Iraqis as trans-historical political subjects. Charland (2001) explains: “Constitutive rhetoric does not require a deity, but will require its proxy, figured as the laws of history or of nature. Constitutive rhetoric asserts a normative principle from what would be ostensibly an empirical claim” (p. 618). More specifically, as Zizek (2004) argues about Bush’s foreign policy:

If freedom is God’s gift to humanity, and the U.S. government sees itself as the chosen instrument for showering this gift on all the nations of the world, then those who oppose U.S. policies are rejecting the noblest gift of God to humanity.

President Bush presupposed that the people of Iraqi would reaffirm his decision to invade their country by embracing what was innately part of their national identity and history. The fact that the decision was forced was largely irrelevant in light of these larger metaphysical imperatives. Yet the ensuing relationship between Iraqis and Americans, and the emerging Iraqi identity, depended to a great extent on the willingness of Americans to keep extending their “creative gifts.” Hence, Iraqis might act democratically and in some sense be autonomous and free; at the same time, their ‘democracy’ was almost entirely dependent on their American (coalition) liberators.
Morally, the American policy seemed to be on firm grounding, too. As the President argued, the American people were “honorable” and willing to “sacrifice” for others; they did not seek “conquest” but only to deliver democracy and freedom to oppressed Iraqis. In response, the Iraqis would surely act upon what Bush called their own political/moral duties and “capabilities,” the President’s Iraqi version of the prophetic dualist identity and another source of what appeared to be transcultural identification. This is what, for Bush, gave the American people a distinct ‘American’ identity, but it would also come to distinguish the Iraqis one day as well, setting them apart as democratic models for the entire Middle East. As Bush put it in his “State of the Union,”

Unlike Saddam Hussein, we believe the Iraqi people are deserving and capable of human liberty. And when the dictator has departed, they can set an example to all in the Middle East of a vital and peaceful and self-governing nation.

Perhaps Iraqis “deserved” democracy, as the President suggested. However, as we saw earlier, there was mixed evidence as to whether they were as “capable” or willing to take on an American-style democratic identity, as Bush and members of his administration seemed to “believe.”

American democratic institutions informed the American prophetic dualist character and, by implication, the President’s Iraq policy as well. In the rhetoric of prophetic dualism, these institutions guaranteed America’s freedom, but they also constantly underscored the “duty to defend” persecuted people. The President spoke to this point by reminding listeners that the United States utilized every conceivable democratic institution, from diplomacy to Congressional approval to debate in front of the United Nations Security Council, to reach a decision on how to deal with Saddam Hussein. For Bush, this image of prophetic dualism at work justified the decision to go to war as the only remaining option. Exhausting all available democratic means, the United States was but compelled to invade Iraq and to act in the Iraqis’ best interest. Americans at home and allies abroad, critics of the President who were imploring him to hold off any decision to use military force against Iraq, and especially the Iraqis—all of these audiences were being asked to judge his decision to go to war on the basis of America’s democratic motives, not its ‘conquering,’ hegemonic ambitions. Perhaps most important, however, was that Bush seemed certain that Iraq would become a “peaceful and self-governing nation” and, more particularly, that the Iraqi people would themselves be compelled to act against oppression (i.e., against the terrorists), just like Americans. This hopeful prophetic dualist vision of resurrecting or developing democratic institutions in Iraq— institutions with which most Iraqis were largely unfamiliar—formed another basis of identification between the Iraqis and the Americans as partners in nation-building.

The Narrative of Independence and Iraqi Freedom

As events in Iraq began to spiral out of control, the President paid less attention to the WMD justification, but he continued to argue that Iraqis were showing significant
signs of democratic progress. During 2005 and 2006 he described events in Iraq as a founding analogous to the story of the American Revolution, with all of its serious struggles, setbacks, and eventual democratic breakthroughs. This founding, he predicted, would continue well into the future, just as democracy had played out in his narrative of American history, no matter what critics said and even if progress in Iraq was hard to discern in all of the reported carnage. Bush compared the American founding to events in Iraq on several occasions. For example, in his December 16, 2005, “Remarks to the World Affairs Council,” in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the President described that period “from the end of the Revolutionary War to the election of a constitutional government” as a “time of disorder and upheaval” that included “uprisings, with mobs attacking courthouses and government buildings.” There were “planned military coups” and “tensions between the mercantile North and the agricultural South that threatened to break apart our young Republic. And there were British loyalists who were opposed to independence and had to reconcile with America’s new democracy,” “Our founders,” Bush explained, “faced many difficult challenges. They made mistakes . . . learned from their experiences, and . . . adjusted their approach.” Thus he tried to get audiences to consider the Iraqi experience in light of the American founding. With this in mind, one could see that, as Bush put it, “No nation in history has made the transition to a free society without facing challenges, setbacks, and false starts.” Yet, like Americans, the Iraqis had achieved a number of accomplishments, what he labeled “a remarkable transformation for a country that has virtually no experience with democracy and which is struggling to overcome the legacy of one of the worse tyrannies the world has known. And Iraqis achieved all this while determined enemies use violence and destruction to stop the progress.” Therefore, according to Bush, “thanks to the courage of the Iraqi people, the year 2005” would be much like the year 1776 was for Americans: it would be “recorded as a turning point in the history of Iraq, the history of the Middle East, and the history of freedom.”

Bush argued that specific examples of this democratic founding appeared locally—even if Iraq as a whole was not bustling with democratic activity. He made this clear in his “Remarks,” in which he spoke about the “Shi’a and Kurdish leaders who had power at the polls [and] saw that for a free and unified Iraq to succeed, they needed Sunni Arabs to be part of the Government.” Meanwhile, the disaffected “rejectionists” composed mostly of Sunni Arabs continued to resist the coalition and missed “the privileged status they had under the regime of Saddam Hussein . . . We believe that over time, most of this group will be persuaded to support a democratic Iraq led by a Federal government.” In fact, as Bush explained, the first round of elections in Iraq proved to the Sunnis that “their failure to participate in the democrat [sic] process had hurt their chances and hurt their . . . constituencies.” In other words, by “failing” to participate Sunnis denied an essential part of their identity, worsening their situation. However, as part of the American prophetic dualist role, Bush claimed, “We encouraged Iraq’s leaders to reach out to Sunni leaders and bring them into the governing process.” They did and “representatives of Iraq’s diverse communities drafted a bold constitution that guaranteed” the Iraqi people democratic
rights. Here again the President derived from local developments a narrative of independence not unlike the American narrative of liberty. Gradually, in his estimation, the Iraqis were coming to look something like prophetic dualists themselves—unified, brave and determined to promote democracy, even in the midst of great cultural diversity. Bush quoted an Arab scholar in his “Remarks” to underscore the optimistic results: “the Iraqi constitution marks [according to the scholar] ‘the dawn of a new age in Arab life.”

Bush described the emergence of an Iraqi democratic order in his December 18, 2005, “President’s Address to the Nation,” in which he argued that the United States was “helping the [newly elected] Iraq government establish institutions of a unified and lasting democracy, in which all of Iraq’s people are included and represented . . . .[and] including many Sunni Iraqis who had boycotted national elections last January.” He focused on one individual who, Bush appeared to believe, exemplified the ‘Iraqi’ identity for the post-Saddam Hussein world. After “dipping his finger in the purple ink as he cast his ballot,” Bush explained, this person “stuck his finger in the air and said: ‘This is a thorn in the side of the terrorists.’” When according to the President yet another voter was asked, “‘Are you Sunni or Shia? . . . he responded, ‘I am Iraqi.’”

Reference to the Iraqi security forces was important for building a credible case because it illustrated how, in the President’s view, the Iraqis had come to distinguish good from evil, a critical part of the prophetic dualist identity. Thus in his January 31, 2006, “State of the Union,” Bush argued that while America’s work in Iraq was “difficult,” the enemy standing in the way of both Americans and Iraqis was “brutal.” Yet this enemy would not stop “the dramatic progress of a new democracy.” “In less than three years,” Bush declared, Iraq had “gone from dictatorship to liberation, to sovereignty, to a constitution, to national elections. At the same time, our coalition has been relentless,” battling and destroying the terrorists and “turning over territory to Iraqi security forces.” Although the security forces were composed mainly of Shites, many who utilized their positions to persecute Sunnis, the President still implied that they stood for the entire Iraqi people in a unified struggle against what Bush called on several occasions “the terrorists,” “Al Qaeda,” the “enemies of freedom” and the “Saddamists” loyal to Saddam Hussein.

This definition of the Iraqi people as free and devoted to defeating Iraq’s (and America’s) enemies also created another bridge by which the President believed Americans could identify with Iraqis. It supplied what appeared to be additional evidence that most Iraqis embraced their democratic identity while a small faction—the ‘terrorists,’ for example, were mostly not Iraqi at all—did not. Thus, rather than motivating new insurgents, the President argued that the American occupation was bringing Americans and Iraqis closer together, rallying them around common interests and against a common enemy. As Bush suggested during his “Remarks,” “The American and Iraqi people share the same interests and the same enemies, and by helping democracy succeed in Iraq, we bring greater security to our citizens at home.”

President Bush claimed that democracy and freedom would—or, more importantly was—working to bring Iraqis together, creating a single ‘people’ determined
to make peace and freedom reign in the new Iraq. He equated the inevitable "struggles' and 'ordeals'" of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds with the concerted actions of a newly constituted "community," a term that masked or negated tensions and differences between ethnic and sectarian groups manifested in the daily bloodshed and deep political divisions. All Iraqis appeared as collective agents in Bush’s discourse, "capable of acting freely in the world" (Charland, 1987, p. 140), of acting freely together. Of course, many ‘free’ Iraqis were in fact violently restricting the freedom of their ‘liberated’ fellow citizens. The President’s historical narrative, in other words, created “the illusion of merely revealing a unified and unproblematic subjectivity” by masking “the importance of discourse, culture, and history in giving rise to subjectivity” and to the increasing chaos (Charland, 1987, p. 139; my emphasis). Although Bush claimed the founders of the American Revolution witnessed “disorder and upheaval,” he nevertheless emphasized how they had “adjusted” to these hardships, establishing a lasting democracy. But he glossed over the many great problems and divisions characterizing these efforts in the United States, as well as those facing the founders’ ideological descendents, including the devastating American Civil War. His version of early American history culminating in a thriving democracy suggested that Iraq would follow a similar path towards a political founding in the aftermath of the American invasion. Individual Iraqis would ‘adjust’ to their predicament, just like their American ideological ancestors. According to Bush, the disgruntled but now voting Sunnis exemplified this democratic transformation. Called to action by the narrative of independence—not by tribal, other sectarian loyalties or hatred of Americans—they were becoming members of a “unified” nation. He seemed to be suggesting that Iraqis in the main no longer posed a threat to the occupying American forces, precisely because, as participants in the “democratic process” and by virtue of their “same interests and the same enemies,” these Iraqis were more like Americans than at any other point in their history. But the Iraqis had a distinct set of histories. As Shadid (2005) explains, the United States marched into “an antique land built on layer upon layer of history, a terrain littered with wars, marked by scars, seething with grievances and ambitions” (p. 10). What Bush should have acknowledged was how all of this had shaped Sunnis and Shiites, and how the occupation had created a situation wherein these different ethnic and religious factions would continue to pose a threat not only to American soldiers but also to each other, thus precipitating what turned out to be a civil war–like conflict of their own.

During the first several years of the American occupation, President Bush utilized the prophetic dualist frame to redefine or contain all contradictions posed by events on the ground in Iraq, including the resistance against coalition forces. Even the conduct of American military personnel who were found to have killed innocent Iraqi citizens and tortured Iraqi prisoners of war could be accounted for by dismissing them, as Bush dismissed them, as “a few American troops who dishonored our country” (quoted in Hirsh & Barry, 2004). For the President, these agents had willfully failed to live up to their moral responsibilities in helping the Iraqis establish a secure democracy, as he delineated these responsibilities in his prophetic dualist discourse. The vast majority of Americans in Iraq, Bush reassured audiences in speeches such as
his January 10, 2007, “Address to the Nation on the War on Terror in Iraq,” were “extraordinary and selfless men and women willing to step forward and defend us” and the Iraqi people. “These young Americans,” he asserted, “understand that our cause in Iraq is noble and necessary and that the advance of freedom is the calling of our time.” As it turned out, the Bush administration rationalized and justified a host of questionable procedures, from the detention of prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay prison facility to extraditing terrorist suspects to countries where they were tortured, as a necessity for defeating an ‘evil’ enemy in the larger war on terror. Of course, as mentioned earlier there were signs that Bush’s policy in Iraq had led to some democratic progress. After what New York Times reporter Dexter Filkins (2005) called Iraq’s “first free election in 50 years” in January 2005, then-Prime Minister Ayad Alawi echoed Bush’s rhetoric about democracy when he exclaimed: “We are entering a new [democratic] era of our history and all Iraqis... should stand side by side to build their future. Now is a suitable time for us to work together so that the whole world can watch the capabilities of this great country” (quoted in Filkins). Overall, however, the inefficiencies of the reconstruction efforts, the perceived injustices of the new government, the escalating violence and insecurity, the lack of economic opportunities and the broken infrastructure made democratic practice extremely difficult. The more difficult it became, the more the President intensified the American commitment. Over time, his explanations distorted what was occurring in Iraq, as material and discursive realities contradicted his version of events. By 2006 and into 2007 there was a growing gap between the evidence he cited for an emerging democratic identity in Iraq and events on the ground. As the editors of the New York Times complained, “Where... Bush sees an infant secular Iraqi government, most of the world sees a collection of ethnic and religious factional leaders, armed with private militias, presiding over growing strife between Shiites and Sunnis” (President Bush’s reality, 2007).

The Constitutive Paradoxes of Bush’s Rhetoric

The ideological effects of President Bush’s rhetoric manifested themselves in the American–Iraqi relationship as a series of constitutive paradoxes. In this section I consider these paradoxes in greater detail. As suggested above, when Bush hailed his audiences, he created a paradoxical relationship in which the supposedly freed and yet occupied people of Iraq could only meet the demands of democracy and freedom by acting almost entirely as he and the other coalition ‘liberators’ said they should. Their ‘democratic’ being, Burke might say, came from outside—it was extrinsic to them. Butler would put it this way: the relational terms under which Bush addressed the other in Iraq were paradoxically self-disabling—the gift to democratic subjects offered to enable agency yet prevented that autonomy. Subjection and interpellation are always simultaneously limiting and enabling. “Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (Butler, 1997, p. 2). In Iraq, the
practical consequences of this paradoxical relationship were that, by situating his
audiences within a founding narrative, the telos of which also constrained them, Bush
risked making the people of Iraq dependent on his administration and the American
people for a sense of identity and for the material resources necessary to sustain that
identity over the long term. In this way, neither Americans nor Iraqis were truly free;
instead, the President once again created “the illusion of freedom.” While some
Iraqis responded to Bush’s call for democracy, he (quite correctly) argued that even
these subjects lacked the necessary resources and the material conditions to sustain
democratic change. By at first agreeing, without substantial qualifications and pro-
visos, to supply resources (including military power) and to create better conditions,
the President encouraged the occupied subjects to become dependent on their occu-
piers for material and other resources necessary to establish a secure democracy, even
though democratic transformation might take years. Indeed, despite the stepped-up
commitments the situation in Iraq seemed not to be getting better (i.e., more sub-
stantially democratic) at all. Hence, in principle the rhetorical situation could never
be resolved satisfactorily, never be fully reconstituted as democratic. As long as the
Americans could not leave Iraq, the Iraqis could not be liberated from the occu-
pation. The longer democratization took, and the less Iraqis appeared to be living
up to the moral and political responsibilities associated with democratic identity,
the more President Bush appeared obligated to turn Iraqis and Americans into
nation-builders and to supply the material resources necessary to make this trans-
formation possible. The relationship as occupation had to continue on its present
path until something like an ‘American’ democracy eventually took hold, a trans-
formation consistent with his founding narrative. At the same time, the Americans
were as much implicated in seeing the narrative through to the end as were the Iraqis.
This was simply part of the ‘creative gift-giving’ relationship, as the President defined
it in prophetic dualist terms. Abandoning the newly constituted relationship meant
conceding defeat to America’s enemies. As Bush described the stakes during his June
28, 2005, “Address to the Nation on the War on Terror from Fort Bragg, North
Carolina,”

“The lesson of this experience is clear: The terrorists can kill the innocent, but they
cannot stop the advance of freedom. The only way our enemies can succeed is if
we . . . abandon the Iraqi people to [the terrorists], and if we yield the future of
the Middle East to men like [Osama] Bin Laden. For the sake of our nation’s secur-
ity, this will not happen on my watch.”

Clearly, no American President could permanently guarantee the material
resources this relationship entailed—yet Bush’s rhetoric seemed to point the United
States directly down this path. As Gelb (2004) observes, an open-ended commit-
tment to democratizing Iraq is “unacceptable in America and Iraq. If Mr. Bush clings to
this goal, he will continue to drain our blood and treasure, and still fail” (Gelb, 2004,
p. A12). Bush himself appeared to recognize this conundrum when, speaking to the
City Club in Cleveland, Ohio, on March 20, 2006, he claimed that the best way to build
democracy in Iraq was by declaring, “the United States will never abandon Iraq”
The President’s comment suggests how the problem of recognition often constrains American foreign policy discourse that addresses foreign subjects in prophetic dualist terms as 'like Americans’: It creates a kind of Master-Slave dialectic (Hegel, 1979) in which the self-consciousness and freedom of one party depends on recognition by the other. In order to be truly self-determining, the Iraqis needed to become independent of the Americans, which all the mayhem made impossible. At the same time, in order for the Americans to reconfirm their identity as prophetic dualists during what Bush called a crucial juncture in American history, they needed the Iraqis to recognize (and accept) them as their benefactors, which perpetuated the culture of dependency.

The many different Iraqi insurgent groups, and the threat of an all-out civil war should the Americans withdraw from Iraq, complicated this paradoxical situation even more. According to Tate (2006), “[Charland argues that the process of renaming may enact a constitutive rhetoric, and this constitutive rhetoric may set a historical narrative into motion]” (p. 7). However, Bush’s prophetic dualist rhetoric did not resonate with the material realities and previously articulated identities of Iraqi insurgents. The insurgents pursued religious and political goals that accorded with their own ethnic and sectarian identities and narratives. These were in no way consubstantial with either the American policy or the views of the newly formed Iraqi government. These identities and narratives were already rhetorically constituted but also provoked by the American effort to occupy and democratize Iraq. Why did this provocation occur? One possibility it that the President engaged in what Butler (1997) calls “misrecognition” (p. 96). The name by which he interpellated Iraqis who joined the insurgency was not a proper name but an improper political (or ethnic/religious) category and “hence a signifier capable of being interpreted in a number of divergent and conflictual ways” (p. 96). These names could have been interpreted as affirmations or insults, depending on the context in which the hailing occurred and where, according to Butler, the “context is the effective historicity and spatiality of the sign” (p. 96). The President addressed audiences in the context of a military occupation wherein the language he used to name Iraqis did not provide what Charland (1987) refers to as alternative “subject positions” that “resolved” or “contained” the “experienced contradictions;” his discourse failed to overcome these contradictions in a way that encouraged new “perspectives and motives” conducive to a widely agreed upon democracy (p. 142). Instead, Bush’s rhetoric reduced or ignored Iraqi ethnic/religious traditions and histories, what Butler calls “totalizing” and “paralyzing” the person who is named (p. 96). As political scientist Larry Diamond (2004) puts it, “Too many Iraqis viewed the invasion not as an international effort but as an occupation by Western, Christian, essentially Anglo-American powers, and this evoked powerful memories of previous subjugation and of the nationalist struggles against Iraq’s former overlords.” The President characterized insurgents as “terrorists,” “Al Qaeda,” “enemies of freedom,” “Saddamists” and “rejectionists.” Meanwhile, insurgents who considered themselves faithful Shiites or Sunnis believed they were fighting for their independence from the Americans or for their very survival. Indeed, the radical anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr described his
armed militia’s struggle against the coalition as an attempt to create “an independent Iraq, free of terror and occupation” (quoted in Shadid, 2005, pp. 448–449). The insurgent violence, Butler might say, “enabled” (p. 96) insurgents by setting them free of the American occupation but also by enacting their own ethnic/political identities, even as the violence “paralyzed” Iraq and tumbled it into deeper crisis. Bush called the legitimacy of those who resisted into question by illustrating its incongruence with the proposed national identity. This redefinition of resistance as undemocratic justified the use of additional force in order to contain the resistance. Yet the employment of force itself was undemocratic, sapped American resources, and encouraged newer and more hostile reactions.

So the cycle of subjection, enabling, and resistance went on. Within the context of occupying the Iraqis, the exertion of American power called forth multiple constitutive rhetorics, not all of them friendly to the American occupiers or to other sectarian groups. For Iraqi insurgents, the imposition of American power provided, as Butler (1997) suggests, the very condition of “existence and the trajectory of desire” as these were marshaled into the insurgency; it crystallized the causes of their deprivations and the threats to their freedoms, as Shiites and Sunnis and probably even members of Al Qaeda in Iraq perceived these things. As Shadid (2005) has explained, “Americans talked of independence but were perceived as occupiers” (p. 448). The occupying coalition armies, the Iraqi security forces, the various sectarian militias and ‘death squads’—all of these groups became the ‘overlords’ which insurgents resisted on various religious and political grounds. As Butler might say, the display of American power set loose what insurgents “harbored and preserved” in the beings that they always already were (p. 2).

**Conclusion: The Reflexive Possibilities of Constitutive Rhetoric**

Rhetorical analysis of President Bush’s Iraq war messages reveals how difficult it is in foreign policy contexts to call forth a particular conception of national identity, especially when rhetors exacerbate or fail to negotiate the tensions between ideological effects and between historical narratives and the circumstances of material reality in which (foreign) subjects find themselves. As we saw above, Charland (1987) suggests the broad outlines of a more reflexive approach to deal with contradictory constraints and with self-limiting narrative positions. Citing Stuart Hall, he argues,

> Various contradictory subject positions can simultaneously exist within a culture. . . . These contradictions place a strain upon identification with a given subject position and render possible a subject’s rearticulation. Successful new constitutive rhetorics offer new subject positions that resolve, or at least contain, experienced contradictions. (Charland, 1987, p. 142)

In other words, the development of new subject positions and constitutive identities “is possible at particular historical moments” (Charland, 1987, p. 141). During these moments, advocates must negotiate paradoxical constraints and turn them into founding opportunities or resources for the establishment of a political/moral telos.
They must understand that many audiences exist between and among competing narratives. For Charland (1987; see also 1991), this comprehension moves them closer toward communicative *praxis* by overcoming or defining “away the recalcitrance the world presents by providing the subject with new perspectives and motives” (p. 142). In this sense, President Bush’s rhetoric was not reflexive enough.

In order to encourage a more reflexive democracy in Iraq, efforts to address various ethnic and sectarian groups will not only have to contain some signs of the audiences’ oppositional ethnic/religious positions but also “capture alienated subjects by rearticulating existing subject positions so as to contain or resolve experienced dialectical contradictions between the world and its discourses” (Charland, 1987, p. 142). In other words, as Gelb (2004) advises, security and other material conditions notwithstanding, the negotiation of some kind of collective community can only take place if such rhetorics are based upon the fundamental political reality of Iraq: that none of the three largest ethnic/religious groups—Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis and Kurds—will allow itself to be dominated by the others. Each will fight if its core interests are jeopardized. (p. A12)

Marr adds that political leaders must negotiate political alliances and alignments created on the basis of “interests and programs between and among parties that cut across ethnic and sectarian lines” (quoted in Kelleman, 2006).

As for political debate in America, Bush’s failed constitutive rhetoric, and the constitutive paradoxes that followed, opened a rhetorical space for an increasingly vocal opposition to his Iraq policy. The opposition employed prophetic dualism to stake a path for future American foreign policy while contesting the administration’s application of this policy frame in Iraq. After defeating many prowar political candidates in the 2006 midterm congressional elections, for example, several Democrats in the new Congress, and a few Republicans, maintained a prophetic dualist identity when they shared or endorsed the overarching goal and desirability of democratic governance in places like Iraq. Nevertheless, they disagreed with the means or agencies by which the Iraqis could achieve it and questioned whether an American-style democracy could be created in the Middle East. It is difficult to predict whether the less reflexive tendencies in prophetic dualism, such as missionary overzealousness and inattention to cultural and historical constraints, will be tempered in the ongoing national debate. Whether the oppositional rhetoric can avoid constitutive paradoxes also remains to be seen. The general reluctance to challenge the grounds of prophetic dualism suggests that the constitutive rhetoric of radical change has to operate within a prophetic dualist frame, even as it seeks withdrawal from certain foreign policy endeavors. Thus the emerging rhetoric opposed to President Bush’s Iraq policy retains important features of the American prophetic dualist image while disengaging from the culture of dependency created in part by continued American military occupation. This oppositional rhetoric also suggests that Americans of all political persuasions generally agree with the democratic ideals of Bush’s prophetic dualism. The prophetic dualist ideals embody our national identity, our sense of who we are as a collective ‘people.’ However, even as American policy initiatives address foreign
subjects, interpellating them as a collective democratic ‘we,’ prophetic dualist ideals do not always recognize foreign subjects for who they are, especially a mixed variety of fragmented ‘peoples’ such as the people of Iraq. The constitutive paradoxes this process of address entails must not be ignored.

Notes


[3] In fact, the President explicitly directed many of his comments to the people of Iraq, and Iraqis could learn about the President’s messages and his plans for the nation in the emerging Iraqi media (“Iraq media,” 2003).
Tate (2006) argues that while the ideology of lesbian feminism proved an emancipatory discourse for many lesbian feminists, the “rhetoric failed as a constitutive term of feminist identity as the *telos* implied by the narrative of lesbian feminism redefined feminism according to a narrow and rigid terminology” (p. 2). However, in the rhetorical space opened up by this failure, antifeminists launched a critique of feminist activism in which the rhetoric of white lesbian feminism was co-opted by antifeminist discourse and employed to “discredit and deface feminism in general” (p. 2). The radical rhetoric of lesbian feminists opened a rhetorical space for antifeminists who co-opted part of this rhetoric and undermined the lesbian feminist political project.

There were also the new Iraqi army units, some of which, according to American military advisors, fought eagerly for their independence despite their inexperience. There were individual Iraqis, such as Muhammad Abdul-Ridha, a Najaf goldsmith, who said after dropping his ballot into the box following the January 2005 elections: “We feel now that we are human beings living in this country. Now I feel a responsibility, I have a vote” (quoted in Filkins, 2005). And Saad al-Janabi, a member of the secular party led by Prime Minister Ayad Alawi, who argued that the United States was fighting to “rebuild the country in a liberal, democratic way” (quoted in Youssef, 2006).

A similar paradoxical situation arose when the Bush Administration, apparently caught off guard by Hamas’s victory in a 2006 Palestinian national election, refused to acknowledge or send foreign aid to the organization unless it renounced violence and its stand against Israel, even though the President had earlier called for democratic elections throughout the region. In what appeared to be an effort to repudiate the American reaction by appropriating the narrative of American independence, one Hamas activist referred to the American revolutionary war martyr Patrick Henry and his famous slogan, “Give me liberty or give me death.” As the activist put it sarcastically, “Yeah, we’re following the American example. [So] How can the West criticize us when we’re following their example?” (quoted in Nesbitt, 2006, p. 7B).

Sounding like prophetic dualists, the authors of *The Iraq Study Group Report* lauded the attempt to democratize the Iraqis but also warned that an open-ended commitment of American forces would not provide the Iraqi government the incentive it needs to take the political actions that give Iraq the best chance of quelling sectarian violence. In the absence of such an incentive, the Iraqi government might continue to delay taking those difficult actions. (Baker et al., 2006, p. 50)

An editorial in the *New York Times*, moreover, acknowledged the “desirability” of certain prophetic dualist goals while offering a sober assessment about achieving them in Iraq: “Establishing democracy at the heart of the Middle East no longer qualifies, desirable as that would be” (President Bush’s reality, 2007). Also, Andrew Sullivan, a former neocconservative supporter of the war, recognized the limits of prophetic dualism when he explained that a critical error in deciding to establish democracy in Iraq was “not taking culture seriously enough. There is a huge discrepancy between neoconservatism’s skepticism of government’s ability to change culture at home and its naiveté when it comes to complex, tribal, sectarian cultures abroad” (Sullivan, 2006; see also Fukuyama, 2006). Even the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, the severity of which were for a while effectively diminished by the moralism of the Bush administration, became the object of critical inspection (see Griffith, 2006). As Sorrentino (2007) has suggested, the triumphally self-righteous rhetoric in which “monochromatic moral certitude in favor of family, loyalty, patriotism and apple pie serves as a pretext for wanton slaughter and mayhem” has reached its limit (p. 25). This discourse “puts on display what Barthes called ‘the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations’—a fitting rubric for the gleeful sadism that stares back at us from the Abu Ghraib pictures” (Sorrentino, p. 25).
References


