EVIL'S POLITICAL HABITATS

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In his 2002 State of the Union address, George W. Bush invoked an "axis of evil". What available rhetorical fields enabled *the President* to link together North Korea, Iran, and Iraq and then judge the result as evil? What could hold this unstable train of signification together? Within what discursive registers was such a monstrous, bizarre moral geography *even comprehensible*?[1]

"Evil" finds a hospitable environment in Bush's presidential addresses because of the speculative identity of two seemingly opposed patterns of belief prominent in contemporary America—pervasive relativism and absolutist conviction.[2] Through a retrospective on "evil" in presidential speeches, I show how this coincidence of opposites first inhabits the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, arguably the figure Bush most seeks to emulate as president. At work in the words and personae of both the fortieth and the forty-third presidents is a powerful combination of conviction and vacuity such that resolve exists simply for its own sake. In Bush's speeches this resolve culminates in a vision of himself and America as instruments of the will of God. "Evil" could inhabit the 2002 State of the Union address not simply because of Bush's fluency in the language of the faith, but because of the coincidence of conviction and the broader culture of relativism in which the term "evil" floats so freely. "Evil" is powerful, efficacious, because its very lack of meaning (or the excesses of meaning overdetermining it, which is the same thing) enables the term to produce a conviction-effect: no matter what "evil" means, people can be confident in Bush's conviction—he *knows*.[3] Hearing the 2002 State of the Union address, we believed that he was convinced there was an axis of evil.[4]

Many Evils

At first glance, it might appear that "evil" could inhabit the 2002 State of the Union address because of the ready availability of a discourse of fear and terror following the events of September 11th, one, and of the prominence of religion in American life, two. Although "evil" no doubt flourishes in these discursive environments, to focus on either distracts attention from the pervasiveness of "evil" and the multiplicity of its modes of appearance.

September 11th has been said to have changed everything.[5] It exposed the pernicious danger of postmodern relativism and the soul-destroying impact of irony. It proved decisively the reality of evil in the world. And, it has reconfigured reality by challenging us, the civilized (according to Bush and Samuel Huntington), to confront, wage war on, evil. These claims for September 11th are rooted in a discursive habitat formed by and nourished through the culture wars. They stem from the assumption that over the past forty years Americans have lost their moral sense, their capacity to speak seriously about evil. This loss is said to be significant, a truncating of the moral world insofar as the category "evil" is necessary for evaluating experiences, harms, sufferings, and dangers. This concern about the amputation of Americans' moral sense, moreover, shares its discursive habitat with critical claims regarding the culture of irony, a fecund environment already in the post WWII era as the presumption of the general secularization of American society took hold.[6]

That these claims for September 11th stem from the discursive environment of the culture wars is also attested to by a second assumption, namely, that relativists hate America. A number of conservative thinkers contend that the problem with liberals or postmodernists is not that they are relativists, but, on the contrary, that their apparent ethical pluralism is in fact ideological. Liberals and their ilk aren't really relativist at all. Rather, they believe that America itself is evil.[7] For these conservatives, relativism, and its multicultural, ecumenical, and ethically pluralist kin, serves as the ideological guise of a treasonous anti-Americanism. These conservatives assume that "evil" remains part of a postmodern world view, a world view that is antithetical to American values and that September 11th revealed to be a threat to American unity and security.

The problem with the idea that September 11th provides the conditions of possibility for Bush's use of "evil" because "everything has changed" is that it is too vague and broad to account for the specific-

ity of the rhetoric of evil. Why did the change in "everything" not reconfigure political language around the need for a global humanity or in terms of hope, care, or the triumph of the human spirit? That contemporary political rhetoric does not provide a hospitable environment for these terms seems fairly obvious—but why? A plausible account would need to attend at least to the discursive field of the culture wars, finding there the context delimiting "everything". But, even if there were a plausible link between September 11th and evil, this link could not extend by itself to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. So how was the articulation of these three countries together with evil possible?[8] What enabled this use of "evil"? An appeal to September 11th can't answer these questions.

The prominence of religion in American life suggests a readily available reservoir of terms of moral denunciation and outrage. Eighty percent or more Americans do not doubt the existence of God, pray daily, and believe in a final judgment.[9] The religious right is clearly a powerful political force, one that has strengthened its hold and influence over the past thirty years.[10] Yet, the ready availability of languages of faith and religious judgments conflicts with the notion that September 11th changed everything. The latter idea presupposes an underlying secularization or falling away from faith, a decline or loss of faith, not its prominence and ready availability as a language of moral condemnation.[11]

More important, however, is the rich variation among and within American religious discourse. Religious language inhabits the political register in multiple, changing, and inconsistent ways. There is not a single or constant discourse of religion in American history: "evil" isn't and never has been "one thing" in American life. Eisenhower, for example, drew often upon a language of faith, beginning his first inaugural address with a prayer. Yet, his use of "evil" differs significantly from Bush's. Indeed, religious controversy and disagreement is far more prevalent in U.S. history and politics than anything like a unified Christian doctrine. There is even fragmentation and disagreement on the so-called religious right. One of the hardest hitting critiques of the "evils of Fundamentalism" comes from John F. Baugh, a mainstream Southern Baptist who anchors his arguments firmly in the Bible.[12]

That "evil" in the 2002 State of the Union address grew out of a language of faith is uncontroversial. Former Bush speech writer David Frum attests that "axis of hatred" in the original draft of the 2002 State of the Union was changed to "axis of evil" because it resonated

better with the theological language Bush had been using since September 11th.[13] To call this theological language "religion", however, is to solidify into unity a set of stories, tropes, ethics, and imaginaries that are already fluid and multiple. Bush's own salvation experience, his personal religious walk, does not stand for "religion" in the singular. His relation to scripture and experience of conversion are not tied to mainstream denominational religion. Rather, they emerged out of a small-group program of focused reading and discussion called Community Bible Study. Moreover, the difference between Bush's "faith walk" and his father's Episcopalian upbringing enabled the younger Bush to serve as the liaison to the religious right for the 1988 presidential campaign.[14] In the face of religious pluralism, the historical changes and variations within and between American religions, Bush's religiosity cannot account for the "axis of evil". Instead, we need to know more about the variety of ways in which religious invocations can be convincing in politics. How, in other words, are these invocations at home in a community larger than a specific community of faith?

Ultimately, the problems occasioned by focusing on September 11th and religion arise from a certain unicity of thought. Each account, in inverse ways, formats "evil" as a singularity as if "evil" were a master signifier capable of stopping shifts in signification. The idea that "everything has changed" obscures its rhetorical habitat, treating as a given the culture war's contestations over morality and values.[15] The idea that a pervasive American religiosity accounts for "evil" likewise fails to attend to the varieties of religious practice and expression. In short, operating within each idea is a failure to attend to the ways that "evil" stimulates speech.

"Evil" is not at all uncommon. It's all over the place.[16] Evil is a major literary theme. A quick Google search turns up more than five million web sites with "evil". Many are satirical. Some involve faux mathematical equations proving that women are the root of all evil. Horror movies often explore the nature of evil, whether in the guise of say, Hannibal Lecter, or Austin Powers' nemesis, Dr. Evil. In psychoanalytic terms, evil functions not at a master signifier or nodal point but as *objet petit a*, Jacques Lacan's term for that fantastic/Real excess that attracts us and repels us, that we can desire but never reach, that we might flee but can never escape.[17] The repressive hypothesis, then, doesn't apply to evil.[18]

So even as Bush may invoke "evil" as that ultimate threat which cannot be left unaddressed, this invocation does not unleash a re-

pressed language of "evil". That language is already there. "Evil" thrives in various habitats and registers. It adapts to differing practices, uses, and deployments. Journalists emphasize this multiplicity, seemingly stunned by the excesses of evil's free-floating moments even as they ponder the instability of any and all attempts to explain or signify evil.[19] In fact, this very multiplicity figures into invocations of evil as that which *must* be confronted as it comes to be embodied and summoned through extreme, unbearable images. Writing in *Time* magazine, Lance Morrow declares, "even if it's elusive and even if the term is used brainlessly, evil is still there—a mystery, a black hole into which reason and sunshine vanish but nonetheless . . . there. Talk to the children with chopped off hands in Sierra Leone".[20] Armed with horrifying examples, one invokes "evil" as that which even the most deconstructive postmodernist cannot deny. One might say that in this way "evil" functions as a conservative logic of performative contradiction (by getting the relativist to deny that Hitler or slavery is evil, say, the conservative or absolutist thinks that he has exposed a fundamental inconsistency that calls into question the place from which the relativist speaks) or a theological diagnosis of relativism's universal symptom (if one accepts that X—or denies that Y—is evil, then one has no way not to accept, ultimately, the extermination of masses of people, the obliteration of humanity, or the destruction of the world).[21]

Detailed, embodied, sexualized bottom-line "evil" appears in David Frum's account of his role in constructing Bush's 2002 State of the Union address. Frum notes his reservations regarding what exactly to say about Saddam Hussein given that children might be watching the television speech with their parents: "Did we really want the president describing how Saddam murdered his enemies by burning them alive in acid baths? Or broke their nerve by forcing them to watch as his soldiers raped their daughters and wives? Or cut off the hands and ears or gouged out the eyes of soldiers he suspected of lack of courage?"[22] To be sure, these same reservations did not restrain Bush's 2003 State of the Union address. In this address, Bush mentions tortured children whose parents are made to watch. And he concludes his list of methods used in the "torture chambers of Iraq"—electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues—with the words "if this is not evil, then evil has no meaning".[23]

Much more needs to be said about the details of "evil" and the role of these details in creating a habitat for the language of "evil" in

political discourse than I can go into here. The matter is not, however, one of uncovering dogmatism. I say this because the generally interesting and thoughtful account of the modes and genres of political moralizing offered by Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro overlooks the appeal of moral certainty in politics. For them, moralizing refers to "a style of speaking, writing, and thinking that is too confident about its judgments and thus too punitive in its orientation to others".[24] This overconfidence, they continue, "slips easily into dogmatism". Deployments and incursions of "evil" in political language are resolutely, profoundly, deliberately dogmatic. When politicians like Bush use "evil", they are saying that there are conditions and circumstances where dogmatism is necessary. Overconfidence and a punitive orientation are part of their appeal (an appeal marked by the excessive "too punitive"). For the dogmatic, dogmatism is a strength, a virtue. What is necessary, then, is a consideration of the contexts within which dogmatism is reassuring or even desirable.

Accordingly, I move now to a retrospective on "evil" in presidential speeches. These speeches point to an inverse relation between dogmatism and signification. The stronger the chain of significations articulated with evil, the less dogmatic is the use of the term. In reading these speeches, then, I attend to those moments when "evil" shifts from a statement about an object to a sign of the (dogmatic) conviction of a subject.

Presidential evil

"Evil" has long been comfortable in presidential rhetoric, easily adapting to its changing demands. Taking up the Puritan political sermon or jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovich specifies the role of this rhetoric in producing "America" as a symbol.[25] My account begins in the Depression and period directly prior to the Cold War. Briefly put, as president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt turns to "evil" as he leads the country out of the Depression. He links evil with capitalist excess and the poverty it engenders. His successor, Harry S. Truman, takes on the association of evil with poverty even as he worries about the potential for evil associated with technological development. At the same time, his language comes to express the polarities that will structure the Cold War. Evil, however, is not an element in this articulation. Thus, while evil's primary rhetorical host is economic distress, a secondary variant of "evil" also emerges at this time. This "evil" rides in on complexity and its challenge to power in a democracy.

Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address is known primarily for its oft-repeated line, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself".[26] Not surprisingly, then, evil is nothing to fear. Government can address and manage evil. Performing this address and management, Roosevelt speaks of "evils" in the plural and expels these evils to the past. He observes that there are two safeguards against a return of the "evils of the old order": strict supervision of all banking, credits, and investment and an end to speculation with other people's money. In Roosevelt's second and third inaugural addresses, "evil" inhabits the same rhetorical environment. Not only does Roosevelt continue to criticize those who "betray for profit the elementary decencies of life", he notes as well that Americans are no longer tolerant of abuses of power and heedless self-interest, "evil things formerly accepted" but now not so easily condoned. The third address announces that the country has survived its crisis and "put away evil things".

Even as "evil" is most comfortable in the register of past economic practices no longer threatening America, an evil variant appears in the second inaugural. Here, "evil" remains something to be managed through governance. Yet, now its temporality has changed. Rather than banished to the past, it is projected into a sort of indefinite future-present, the universal extra-temporality of moral engagement. Suggesting that the strength of democracy stems from the power lodged in the people, Roosevelt advises, "as intricacies of human relationships increase, so power to govern them also must increase, power to stop evil; power to do good".

In his first years as president, Truman reiterates Roosevelt's associations of evil with poverty. His 1948 State of the Union address refers to economic distress as a "disease whose evil effects spread far beyond the boundaries of the afflicted nation". The following year, in a general treatment of economic and social problems such as low minimum wage, growing monopolies, prejudice, and intolerance as opportunities for the Congress and the president to work together for the good of the people, he underscores that "Our first great opportunity is to protect our economy against the evils of boom and bust". In addition to linking evil to poverty, Truman also employs the evil variant that appeared in Roosevelt's second inaugural. That is to say, Truman, too, posits evil as something in the future, something to be resisted or overcome through the power of the people. Thus, in his 1950 State of the Union address, in the context of scientific, technological, and, presumably, military developments associated with "opening the secrets of nature", Truman announces, "Man must cre-

ate the moral and legal framework for the world which will insure that his new powers are used for good and not evil. In shaping the outcome, the people of the United States will play a leading role". As with Roosevelt's speeches, then, so do Truman's provide a rhetorical habitat for evil: poverty, economic inequality, and the unchecked pursuit of profit are objects appropriately designated "evil", at the same time, "evil" appears as the object of a project for the future, one associated with the moral strength of democratic governance.

Nevertheless, along with the political climate, the discursive environment of the late 1940s was changing. One site where the change can be detected is in a speech Truman gives before a joint session of Congress in 1947. In that speech, Truman requests economic assistance for Greece and Turkey (and elaborates what would become known as the Truman Doctrine).[27] He also uses the term "evil" and suggests a vision of the world as split between freedom and oppression. "Evil," however, rather than explicitly tied to Soviet communism, remains articulated with poverty. More specifically, Truman asserts: "At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one". On one side is a way of life based on the will of the majority and "distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression". On the other side is a way of life that "relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms".[28] Despite this characterization of Soviet communism, Truman refrains from referring to either the regime or the ideology as "evil". Instead, "evil" retains its link with economic deprivation: "The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife". Evil flourishes in fetid zones of neediness, brutality, and despair. With this variation in the rhetorical environment established, Truman's image of the conflict in Korea as an "evil war by proxy" in his 1951 State of the Union address is not surprising.[29]

President Dwight D. Eisenhower drops from his rhetoric the social and economic sense of evil, embracing instead Truman's opposition between freedom and slavery. Speaking within the symbolic frame of the Cold War, Eisenhower depicts this opposition in terms of a moral struggle between good and evil, although, like Truman, he refrains from calling the Soviet enemy itself "evil". Additionally, even as Eisenhower adopts a more religious rhetoric than that of his

two immediate predecessors, the link they make between scientific and technological power and the challenge this power poses for future paths toward good or evil nevertheless continues to inhabit his speeches. I focus here on his first inaugural address (which establishes the rhetorical patterns he will follow thereafter; interestingly, he will not use the term "evil" in his famous "military-industrial-complex" speech).

Before beginning his speech, Eisenhower asks his audience to bow their heads as he utters what he refers to as "a little private prayer of my own". (That Eisenhower refers to a prayer said in a public office-taking ceremony as private, given that he speaks the prayer aloud and asks the audience to join him in bowing their heads, deeply challenges the notion of "private". Still, the very fact that Eisenhower felt compelled to refer to his prayer as "private" suggests the continued presence of some sort of boundary or line between personal expressions of religious faith and public responsibility. In other words, were he to have no sense of the importance of a separation between church and state or faith and politics, Eisenhower would not have paid lip-service to the distinction between public and private acts.) He then testifies to the significance of the present moment in American history:

> The world and we have passed the midpoint of a century of continuing challenge. We sense with all our faculties that forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history.
>
> This fact defines the meaning of this day. We are summoned by this honored and historic ceremony to witness more than the act of one citizen swearing his oath of service, in the presence of God. We are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free.[30]

Having grown in strength and responsibility in the course of confronting wars and economic depression, the U.S. finds itself beseeching God's guidance and "groping to know the full sense and meaning of these times". Is the world heading toward darkness or nearing the light? This particular time of trial "comes at a moment when man's power to achieve good or to inflict evil surpasses the brightest hopes and the sharpest fears of all ages". Yet, the very hopes and promises mankind's achievements have enabled now imperil life itself. The proper response to science, the only response adequate to the threat of darkness and annihilation facing the world, is faith.

For Eisenhower, it is time for America to reaffirm and proclaim the faith of the free in man's deathless dignity as governed by eternal and natural law. "This faith defines our full view of life", Eisenhower declares. "It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man's inalienable rights, and that make all men equal in His sight". Enemies of this faith worship force, and torture truth. America's destiny as the leader of the free world is thus to confront these enemies with confidence, conviction, moral strength, and, again, staunch faith. All Americans must be united as they renew their faith and devote themselves to the nation's fundamental precepts:

> No person, no home, no community can be beyond the reach of this call. We are summoned to act in wisdom and in conscience, to work with industry, to teach with persuasion, to preach with conviction, to weigh our every deed with care and with compassion. For this truth must be clear before us: whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America.

In sum, "evil" serves in Eisenhower's rhetoric to mark the moral precipice on which America, and the world, find themselves. What Roosevelt and Truman projected into the future as the possible object of a collective project confronts America as a problem now, in the present. "Evil" is that in opposition to which America can know and realize who it is.[31]

John F. Kennedy's inaugural address ("ask not what your country can do for you") adopts a tone decidedly different from Eisenhower's. Rather than emphasizing a fundamental division in the world, Kennedy appeals to hopes for peace, to civility, to arms control, to scientific wonder (rather than terror) and to shared struggle against common problems of disease, poverty, and war. Kennedy's language is also far less religious (likely because religious language from Kennedy would suggest his Catholicism and could occasion anxiety about Papal influence). These changes have not created a discursive environment completely inhospitable to evil—but close. In two speeches given in June of 1963, Kennedy refers to communism as an evil system. He nevertheless qualifies these remarks, noting that "no government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue" and bracketing the attribution of "evil" as words of "a few who say".[32] Such qualification may have enabled the mutated "evil" that appears in his address on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In this speech, evil is linked neither to America's

moral destiny nor to economic and social ills. Rather, it appears as an object in non-American eyes, that is, as how others may see America. The President notes:

> These tests befoul the air of all men and all nations, the committed and the uncommitted alike, without their knowledge and without their consent. That is why the continuation of atmospheric testing causes so many countries to regard all nuclear powers as equally evil; and we can hope that its prevention will enable all those countries to see the world more clearly, while enabling all the world to breathe more easily.[33]

Kennedy's language suggests that if America looks at itself from the perspective of nonaligned nations, it might well recognize a more complex moral world than the one governing its prior assumptions of right.

Lyndon B. Johnson retains this more complex vision, suggesting as well that it is not one conducive to the language of "evil". Thus, in his "Let Us Continue" speech given after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson doesn't declare war on evil or unite Americans in steadfast dedication to its eradication. Rather, he says that the challenge is not to linger over this "evil moment", but to move forward. To this end, Johnson urges Congress to increase taxes and enact a civil rights bill. He concludes:

> The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand and respect each other. So let us put an end to the teaching and the preaching of hate and evil and violence. Let us turn away from the fanatics of the far left and the far right, from the apostles of bitterness and bigotry . . .[34]

Finding "evil's" proper home to be in the extreme speech of fanatics, Johnson attempts to weed it out of political speech.

Yet, he can't eliminate it entirely. "Evil" sometimes appears in its older form as a social and economic evil, as lack and deprivation.[35] "Evil" also sprouts up in Johnson's 1967 State of the Union address, albeit sheltered within a quote from Thomas Jefferson: "It is the melancholy law of human societies to be compelled sometimes to choose a great evil in order to ward off a greater evil". Johnson invokes these words to justify the choice to fight a limited war in Vietnam.

Perhaps because evil had become, at least in this specific rhetoric, something America chose, that is, an acknowledged although dreaded attribute of American actions, it only rarely finds itself in

the words of the three presidents who follow Johnson. For the most part, these presidents actively and consciously employ a political language designed to lessen political tensions. I include here a few examples. Nixon, in his first inaugural address, reiterates Johnson's attempt to produce a moderate political language even as he distances himself from Johnson's war. Drawing from a Quaker language of simplicity, quietude, and responsive listening, Nixon suggests that answers to America's problems might be found if Americans look within themselves for "the simple things, the basic things" such as "goodness, decency, love and kindness". If Americans are to listen to each other, moreover, they will have to learn to stop shouting. Nixon notes that "America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading". As "we", the American people, learn to speak quietly, government, also identified as "we," will listen: "We will strive to listen in new ways—to the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart—to the injured voices, the anxious voices, the voices that have despaired of being heard".[36] In this environment, "evil" has no place.

Gerald Ford also expresses exhaustion with evil, a sense that words like "evil" should not inhabit political discussion. "Evil" is too extreme and dangerous a term for politics. But, even as Ford wants the term eliminated, it undergoes an additional mutation in his rhetoric: "evil" is how "others" refer to America. In his January 19, 1976 State of the Union Address, Ford complains that Americans have for too long "downgraded" themselves as a nation. "The American people have heard too much about how terrible our mistakes, how evil our deeds, and how misguided our purposes. The American people know better. The truth is we are the world's greatest democracy."[37] In his official speeches as President, Carter doesn't use "evil" at all, emphasizing instead the more inclusive ideal of human rights.

Ronald Reagan's speeches employ a radically different rhetoric from those of his immediate predecessors. On the one hand, the stark divisions of his Cold Warrior stance create, as did Eisenhower's, a fertile environment for the oppositions of good and evil, free and totalitarian, us and them. On the other hand, evil's political habitat in Reagan's speeches is so rich that the term rapidly reproduces and spreads far beyond the initial binary of American and Soviet. Among those items Reagan identifies as "evil" are dim economic prospects, inflation, stagflation, terrorism, deaths of American soldiers in El Sal-

vador, international drug-trafficking, "more and more government intervention", segregation, discrimination based on race, religion, and sex, racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic and religious intolerance, Hitler, and the Holocaust.[38] Thus, in Reagan's speeches, myriad issues are matters of moral struggle. Indeed, this condition of struggle is, for Reagan, ontological: the world itself consists of great good and great evil. Such an establishing of evil as a fact of existence changes the character of the moral judgment. Under conditions of ontological evil, failing to recognize evil becomes moral weakness while naming it becomes the key signifier of moral strength, courage, and will. Differently put, Reagan's language blends two approaches to evil, a moral and an ontological, and such a blending transforms political struggles between winners and losers into moral struggles between saints and sinners or, worse, the forces of God and the forces of Satan.[39]

Ontological evil provides the context for Reagan's "evil empire" speech and one he made in 1992 at the Oxford Union. This latter address, moreover, exemplifies most strongly the discursive environment of "evil today". I turn first to the "evil empire" speech. Reagan delivered it before the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida on March 8, 1983.[40] The first half of the speech emphasizes policies dear to the Christian right: restrictions on abortion and a constitutional amendment to restore prayer to public schools. Although this part of the speech appeals to religious tenets with a long history in American political rhetoric (with cites to William Penn, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington), it is not itself expressed in the language of religious conviction.

That mode of expression appears in the second half of the speech. As he concludes his discussion of every child's right to life, Reagan observes "a great spiritual awakening in America". Shortly thereafter, he repeats, "America is in the midst of a spiritual awakening". He then repeats the biblical keynote of the evangelical association's meeting, "yes, let justice roll on like a river". As I see it, these repetitions serve as a transition into a more religious mode of speech, into a language of faith. And, indeed, as Reagan moves to the last two issues of his speech, he turns to philosophy and theology to ground his claims about ontological evil:

> …we must never forget that no government schemes are going to perfect man. We know that living in this world means dealing with what philosophers would call the phenomenology of evil or, as theologians

> would put it, the doctrine of sin. There is sin and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might.

The world is a moral battlefield, the site of the epochal struggle between good and evil, right and wrong, and God commands his people, not to turn the other way or shield themselves from evil, not to appease or accommodate their adversaries, but to struggle, with all their might, against evil in this world.

The last two issues in Reagan's speech are dramatized within this fundamental struggle that faces humanity as a whole. The first enacts the purification of the soul or the setting in order of one's house that prepares the chosen for spiritual warfare. Reagan tells the evangelicals that America, too, has "a legacy of evil with which it must deal". This legacy involves racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry, and prejudice.[41] Reagan enjoins his audience to transcend these evils: "Use the mighty voice of your pulpits and the powerful standing of your churches to denounce and isolate these hate groups in our midst. The commandment given us is clear and simple: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'". Cleansed of past sins and girded in moral rectitude, America will have the strength for the ultimate battle, a spiritual battle, against the "aggressive impulses of an evil empire".

The stakes are high—people's very souls. After he urges his audience to stand with him in opposing "the so-called nuclear freeze solutions proposed by some", Reagan shifts, dramatically, to the story of a young father, a father who loves his two little girls so much that he would rather see his "little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God". The fight against the Soviets is a fight for salvation, eternal life. And so Reagan declares:

> Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in totalitarian darkness—pray that they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.

Like the serpent in the garden, an image Reagan also invokes, Marxism-Leninism tempts humanity with false promises of power and omnipotence. But, these are not promises any government can keep: true strength is spiritual. Likewise, America, although it needs strong

defense, cannot rely simply on bombs and rockets: "The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith".

Evil is alive in Regan's speech. It is a powerful force that permeates the world in which Americans find themselves and that establishes the very conditions that give meaning to their lives. These conditions are uncertain and opaque: insofar as there are so many evils—totalitarianism and intolerance, intrusive government and sexual and racial discrimination—it becomes difficult to see what, precisely, the attribution "evil" is signifying. More bluntly put, how can Reagan invoke a Christian God, claim that the Soviets are evil because they do not believe in God, *and* urge tolerance? Reagan's emphasis on tolerance thus introduces an uncertainty into what, exactly, is evil—indeed, the American legacy of evil he invokes is rife with division on precisely this point. Is what was once understood as the evil of miscegenation, for example, now to be recognized as an instance of the evil of discrimination? And what about the right to abortion? Why is that not important in ending sex discrimination, another evil that Reagan urges his evangelical audience to address? Yet the ambiguity here is important for it opens up a space for moral will, for decisiveness and action, for living struggle. For Reagan, evil is clear. He knows what it is. By naming evil, then, Reagan places himself within a prophetic tradition dear to evangelicals and rooted in American history. He places himself, that is to say, in the position of someone with an ontological knowledge of the truth and with the moral courage to speak the truth. Evil's ambiguity enables the importance of the term to shift to the one willing to invoke it.

In a later interview, Reagan emphasizes that the importance of "evil" in the speech was not so much that it characterized the Soviets, though it did, but that it expressed a willingness to acknowledge real differences between the US and the USSR. Thus, in response to the interviewer's observation that the speech made it seem like reconciliation between the two powers would be impossible given that what was at stake was a confrontation between good and evil, light and dark, Regan responds:

> I think it is somehow lifting that out of context—of this line and this description as the focus of evil and so forth. Certainly their entire beliefs, beginning with the disbelief in God—their beliefs are so contrary to what we accept as morality. Witness a Kampuchea and an Afghanistan and so forth. But no, what I was pointing out there, and I still believe is time-

> tested and proven, is not the inevitability of war, but a recognition and a willingness to face up to what these differences are in our views and between us, to be realistic about it.[42]

Realism, for Reagan, involves the recognition of the evil in the world, the willingness to accept that the world is not a perfect place and never will be. Reagan knows what the world is like and he is strong enough in his convictions to face this world without blinking or blinders.

This conviction, this willingness to acknowledge and name evil in the world, is not limited to the discursive environment of the Cold War. Rather, the end of the Cold War releases the terminology of evil from the already weak constraints of the confrontation between the US and USSR. This spreading, flourishing evil, and the willingness to name it, is the second aspect of Reagan's speeches that continues to flourish today in the rhetoric of George W. Bush. It appears most strongly in a speech Reagan gave in England after he was president and after the end of the Cold War.

On December 4, 1994, Reagan delivered the address, "Democracy's Next Battle", at the Oxford Union Society.[43] Noting that the fight against totalitarianism "was a grand and noble cause, one that united the entire civilized world", Reagan finds that its end has "robbed much of the west of its uplifting, common purpose". "Will we turn inward, lulled by a dangerous complacency and the short-sighted view that the end of one Evil Empire means the permanent banishment of evil in all its forms?" he asks. To answer, and in answering restore a sense of mission to the "civilized world", Reagan returns to ontological evil: "Evil still stalks the planet". Although this evil is not identical to the evil of Marxism-Leninism, although it is not systematic, coherent, or localized, it continues inevitably to permeate the world. As Reagan declares,

> Its ideology may be nothing more than blood lust; no program more complex than economic plunder or military aggrandizement. But it is evil all the same. And wherever there are forces in the world that would destroy the human spirit and diminish human potential, they must be recognized and they must be countered.

The mission Reagan envisions is for "civilized nations" to stand "in unison" against "immoral and deadly excesses" around the globe such as those undertaken by Saddam Hussein and in places like

Bosnia, Somalia, and Sudan. Fighting these evils will require imposing "civilized standards" of international conduct and enforcing those standards with a fully equipped U.N. force—"an army of conscience". Thus, Reagan challenges his Oxford audience to contribute to the "age-old battle for individual freedom and human dignity". The next generations, like the ones before them, have a cause and service to this cause will provide their lives with meaning. They should not forget those who suffer violence and neglect. As Reagan enjoins, "Do not abandon them to the evils of totalitarian rule or democratic neglect". In this late speech, then, democratic neglect, failure to name and act, is itself an evil, one that Reagan is continuing to fight.

Since his presidency ended, Republicans and conservatives have continued to praise Reagan for his resolve. Crediting him with bringing down the Soviet Union and, echoing his 1984 campaign theme, with bringing morning to America after the "malaise" of the Carter years, those on America's political right celebrate Reagan for the realism and moral strength of his political message. But, what exactly does realism mean here? The obvious answer that "realism" refers to the emphasis on security characteristic of the realist school of international relations, fails to explain why, exactly, a bifurcated world view and disdain for arms control are realistic responses to a nuclear standoff. More importantly, this answer fails to account for the context of Reagan's invocations of evil in his ontology. For Reagan, evil is Real—it flows throughout the world, threatening and subverting the civilized order. Precisely because of its pervasive, excessive, nature, this evil can be slippery, deceptive. Recognizing it, naming it, thus requires will—the will to break with conventional wisdom, stop paying lip service to the order of appearances, reject established political norms (this rejection of norms is of course a key feature of realist international relations). Indeed, the necessity of the strength of will is all important given the loss, violation, or denial of the symbolic order: naming evil demands a response, a willingness to "do what is necessary", to engage in acts and practices that, from the perspective of the symbolic, may seem themselves to be evil.

One of the insights of psychoanalysis is that the decline of the symbolic leads to a powerful alliance of the imaginary with the Real. Such an alliance is clearly at work with Reagan for, accompanying his ontological evil, were fantasy images of Reagan as a cowboy and explicit acknowledgements of his work as an actor. The realism of Reagan's political will, in other words, was always supported by fantasies of figures of strength. Reagan could play these roles and,

indeed, gestured to them by repeating lines from his movies, "take one for the Gipper".

American presidents have long drawn from religious language. Twentieth century presidents have, like those who came before them, used the term "evil". But the term means different things in different contexts—and sometimes it doesn't mean anything at all; sometimes, that is, it signifies the will of the one who speaks it, not the object to which it refers. The discursive environment provided by Reagan's speeches differs significantly from those of his immediate predecessors—Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter. Superficially, they resemble Eisenhower's, but this resemblance to Eisenhower's is misleading. Not only does Eisenhower refer to his inaugural prayer as "private" and refrain from attempting to convert the Soviets from their atheism, but he also treats the forces of good and evil as elements of the symbolic order of the Cold War: freedom is good and totalitarian slavery is evil. Eisenhower invokes a symbolically consistent moral world, one where the ambiguities and tensions always subverting attributions of good and evil are repressed, contained. In that moment of history when the world faces a choice between good and evil, America must not give way on its faith in human freedom and dignity. These inalienable rights are gifts of the Creator; the struggle to secure them takes place in the presence of the Creator, and America turns to the Creator for guidance in these times. But, Eisenhower does not say that he or America is an instrument of the Creator. He does not say that God has instructed the US to fight His battle against the forces of evil. In short, Eisenhower's language works within the symbolic order of the Cold War as it presents Americans as subjects with choices and responsibilities. Reagan depicts evil as Real and says that God commands us to fight against it.

The difference between Reagan's language and that of Truman and Roosevelt is also misleading. Like them, he links evil to technological complexity, diminished human potential, and that which is to be fought through the moral strength of democratic governance. Yet, what is most striking is what happens to governance in the face of Reagan's ontologization of evil: a radical fusion of previously separate fields and practices. Recall, Reagan finds evil in dim economic prospects, deaths of American soldiers in El Salvador, terrorism, drug-trafficking, "excessive" government intervention, intolerance, segregation, discrimination, racism, and anti-Semitism. In the Oxford Union speech, moreover, he urges that wherever they arise all such forces must be recognized and countered. He envisions a

U.N. backed "army of conscience". Ontological evil thus overflows already unstable distinctions between war and policing, religion and politics, justice and administration. In the face of the Real of evil, these divisions—and a disciplining, actuarial approach to risk—fall apart. Rather than operating within a political space, ontological evil, as I argue in the next section, participates in its foreclosure or elimination.[44]

George W. Bush and Ontological Evil

Just as Reagan prayed for the salvation of those living in totalitarian darkness, so does George W. Bush find religion the best response to political troubles. As Howard Fineman observes, "the Bush administration is dedicated to the idea that there is an answer to societal problems here and to terrorism abroad: give everyone, everywhere, the freedom to find God, too".[45] And, just as Reagan envisions in his Oxford Union address, so does Bush see the world today as a religious war of good versus evil expressed through the racial logic of the civilized versus the barbarians. To draw out these parallels, I emphasize Bush's combination of vacuity and conviction. Not only does "evil" inhabit Bush's speeches as an ontological given and thus highlight his resolve in naming it, but it works further to designate the subject confronting evil as an object or instrument of God. Because conviction comes from God, the one who names evil serves as an extension or embodiment of God's will. I am tempted to make the point even more strongly—*the only way Bush can guarantee that he is chosen by God is by demonstrating the power God gives him to name and confront evil* without wavering, with complete and utter conviction (in the face of criticism, competing facts, alternative views, etc). For the responsible will of fallible and uncertain political subjects, then, ontological evil substitutes confrontations between objects in accordance with the inevitabilities of the will of God. Put more psychoanalytically, Bush's embrace of ontological evil entails a shift from the hysterical subject of democracy, the subject who keeps asking questions and challenging authority, to the perverse, post-political subject—the pervert has no doubts; he "brings to light, stages, practices the secret fantasies that sustain the dominant public discourse".[46] The pervert knows what is required and makes himself into that instrument that does what is required.

Accounts of the 2000 presidential campaign emphasize the emptiness, if not downright stupidity, of George W. Bush. Bush exhibited little interest in policy specifics and little knowledge of political issues. Polls taken during the primaries, says Frank Bruni, the *New York Times* reporter assigned to the Bush campaign and White House, "showed that support for Bush was less firmly grounded in anything real than support for some other candidate was".[47] Respondents found it difficult to give specific reasons for their support for Bush. Yet Bush's vagueness was useful. Bush was a candidate "whose very lack of bold definition—whose spongy failure to make an emphatic mark—allowed him to assume the attributes of the scenery around him. It enabled him to be whatever people were inclined or wanted to see, a Rorschach running for president".[48] A key element of the Republican campaign was thus to rely on images and effects that would affect voters viscerally. The Bush campaign demonstrated, Bruni writes,

> how much could be fixed with powder and puffery, how thoroughly a candidate could be transformed from the outside in, how little he had to do but stand on the right set, under the right lighting, and say the right lines. If it was hard to figure out exactly what Bush was made of—and if, by September 11, 2001, it was not a whole lot easier—this was a good part of the reason.[49]

Bush's vagueness persisted into the early months of his presidency. Again, he demonstrated little patience with the details of governance or the complexities of public policy. His few public statements were vapid sound bites; anything more he tended to bungle with the sort of malapropisms one associates with young children. As his former speech writer David Frum emphasizes, "Bush's political vision was unclear". Bush had political instincts and general beliefs, but, in the first half of 2001, it was nearly impossible to tell what, if any, ideas Bush actually had.[50]

Bush's vacuity was coupled with conviction. His personal faith, the salvation experience that led him to quit drinking and get serious about his life, was his most distinct feature. Voters may not have known exactly what compassionate conservatism entailed, but they did know that Bush was a man of conviction, that he was decisive and relied on his gut instincts. The fact of this conviction has dominated Bush's speeches and the message his administration has sought to impart since September 11th. The terms "evil" and "evil-doers" fre-

quent his rhetoric, as do deeper and more significant religious allusions.[51]

Yet, the confused and scattered initial reactions of the Bush administration to the September 11th attacks should not be forgotten. Speaking in an elementary school in Florida when the planes hit the twin towers, Bush didn't return to Washington for over nine hours, flying instead to air bases in Louisiana and Nebraska. To many, his initial speeches seemed ill-suited to the magnitude of the moment. Early polls suggested that barely half the country were "highly confident" in Bush's ability to handle the crisis.[52] The White House staff worked to control the situation by repeating at every possible moment that the president was "focused" and "resolute". According to Bruni, "the efficacy of even such transparent tactics soon became clear". By using this vocabulary over and over, aides lodged it so deeply in the minds of reporters that these reporters began adopting it without even realizing it. On the morning after Bush's address to Congress, stories in both the *Washington Post* and the *Times* that analyzed his demeanor used the word 'resolute', without quotation marks, in the first paragraphs".[53]

Not surprisingly, the term "resolute" and its kin, "resolve" and "resolution" feature prominently in Bush's September 20, 2001 address to Congress. They characterize what Bush asks of the American people as they enter into "civilization's war", a war that divides the world into those who stand with America and those who stand with America's murderous enemies. They also characterize Bush's own rhetoric: he is certain. He knows—the rightness of the war, even the end of the war. As he testifies, "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them".[54] Bush doesn't know the course of the war, but that sort of detail doesn't matter. What matters is Bush's certainty that God is on America's side and that God's side always wins. After the September 20th speech, confidence in Bush jumped to eighty-six percent (an extraordinary number for an American president) and remained over eighty during the next several months.[55]

Such confidence in Bush results from the combination of vacuity and resolve. What mattered was less the content of speech than the fact that he demonstrated resolve, strength, command. On the one hand, this is not surprising: as was often repeated in the media during those days, America was looking for leadership. One might also express this idea in psychoanalytic terms: many Americans were

looking for someone through whom they could enact revenge for the attacks. On the other hand, there is something surprising in the emptiness of Bush's expectations for Americans—they were to show resolve, too, but in what? In going about their everyday lives, returning to business, loving their families, hugging their children, and shopping. Bush gave Americans permission to do what they wanted to do; doing what they wanted was now their patriotic duty!

Additionally, one should note the splitting that media emphasis on Bush as presidential effects: insofar as the news media in the first months following the September 11th attacks emphasized (incorporating language given them by the White House) how *presidential* Bush was they inadvertently voiced an anxiety that he was not quite presidential or that there was at least a risk of him not being presidential enough. *Shouldn't resolve be demonstrated by more than going back to our everyday activities? Shouldn't someone be made to suffer? To die?* Differently put, attention to the appropriateness of his resolve or demeanor underscores the gap between the man and his office. As the war on terror continued, this gap was covered over by the fantasy of a second, evil, more powerful, leader, one perhaps less constrained by goodness or compassion, one willing to exact the necessary, awful revenge—Vice President Dick Cheney at work in his secret underground bunker, heading the shadow government.

Slavoj Žižek's account of the two figures of the Master helps explain the importance of this doubling of authority. The invisible Master, Žižek writes, "is a kind of uncanny double of public authority: he has to act in shadow, invisible to the public eye, irradiating a phantomlike, spectral omnipotence".[56] If Bush was the visible voice of justice, resolute, but vague nevertheless, then fantasies of Cheney provided the obscene supplement underpinning this resolve. After September 11th, Bush relied on "evil" to work as a nodal point holding together the discourse that would establish the meaning of the war on terror. Bush and Cheney were two sides of the Master installing this meaning. Bush could give people what they wanted and the very vagueness of what he was giving could be covered over by the fantasy of the repulsive Cheney at work behind the scenes, a fantasy of people really getting what they wanted. Cheney provided the fantasy of secret power, of actions so unbecoming to the president, to America, that they best not see the light of day.

The war on terror is the appropriate background for Bush's axis-of-evil speech not because Saddam Hussein had any connection with September 11th but because Bush's ontological evil fuses all violence,

crimes, threats, and the *potential or possibility* of any violence, crime, or threat into the theater of absolute struggle. As he said in his September 20, 2001 address, anyone not on the side of America was on the side of the terrorists, that is, on the side of evil. Recognizing the importance of this ontological evil makes clear why the facts and details and justifications for war against Iraq had so little to do with the actual invasion. Bush knows—he doesn't need to be bogged down by policies and inspections. Bush is certain—he doesn't need the support or consent of other nations. His certainty comes from God. Precisely because Bush doesn't think so much as feel and pray and rely on his gut, he can know and be certain. Naming evil enacts this certainty. The war against Iraq made sense because it was part of the struggle against evil. The imaginary axis of evil says nothing about Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. It says something about Bush. Secretary of State Colin Powell said as much as he defended the speech by emphasizing "the president's very powerful and clear and honest statement".[57] The statement is powerful, clear, and honest—the president spoke from his heart. The actual facts are not the issue. Bush's conviction empowers him to see among the excesses of evil flowing throughout the world that evil that must be directly confronted and named: he can do more than fight a vague war on terrorism; he can locate in the present those evils that might threaten us in the future. "Evil" thus designates that "special something" (*objet petit a*), that extra beyond brutal, repressive, very bad, that Bush takes as his call to eliminate. (And, conveniently, considering evil as *objet petit a* highlights the way that it will never be eradicated; instead, it is an aspect of the drive to eradicate as such. Bush's notorious May 2003 landing of a small Viking jet onto the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier to announce the victory of US forces in Iraq is a good example here. What criticism of this publicity stunt misses is the way that the warrior images enacted not Bush's fantasy of US militarism but the reality of US militarism—the staged fantasy didn't cover up the truth of ongoing military conflict. On the contrary, it performed it and in so doing expressed the truth of Bush's intentions to continue in his fight to eliminate evil from the world.)

One last aspect of the way "evil" inhabits Bush's language is crucial to understanding how Bush could invoke an axis of evil. This last aspect, moreover, points less toward Bush's serving as some kind of a Master who knows than it does to Bush's functioning perversely as a kind of object or instrument. Bush sees himself as chosen by God. He sees America as duty bound to ensure the establishment of God-given

rights all over the world. To this extent, fighting evil is a false choice: we have no choice; or, the only response to this choice is to accept it, *bring it on!*—anything else is damned from the outset. The falseness of this choice is clear when we try to introduce it into the field of politics and debate it: *okay, we can end world poverty, find a cure for cancer, or eradicate evil in the world*—whoever "votes" against eradicating evil must secretly support it! Perhaps the proper response to Bush's ontological evil is to take the choice of fighting evil seriously—yes, there is evil in the world, but there are other challenges as well.

Nevertheless, once the US is God's chosen instrument for removing evil from the world, we have lost even the illusion—itself a vital source of utopian energies—of democracy and the rule of law. Invoking evil as Real ruptures the symbolic order of language, rules, and norms—Bush can barely speak; his administration uses language as a mantra, meme, or slogan to affect people directly and viscerally; and, his invasion of Iraq broke explicitly with previous US foreign policy, the norms of the international community. How far this has gone might be seen in the attacks on Howard Dean, the Vermont governor who sought the Democratic nomination for president. Dean has been widely mocked for suggesting that Osama bin Laden should receive a fair trial. The rule of law, it seems, is now a joke, a joke preventing the US from eradicating evil from the world.

Conclusion

While "evil" has long flourished in the fecund discursive habitats of Americanized religiosity, it has inhabited political speech as well, evolving as it adapts to changes in political climate. "Evil" is at home in George W. Bush's presidential rhetoric not because of his own personal faith, but because of a larger coincidence of relativism and absolutist conviction, of the instability of signification and the resolve to signify in the face of this instability. Rather than two warring ethical or epistemological attitudes, relativism and absolutist conviction are two sides of the same coin, part of the same ideological matrix. On the one hand, this coincidence of opposites involves the way that each position limits and conditions the other—relativists understand their position against absolutists and vice versa. To this extent, neither position is fully identical with itself; each is internally split, possible only through the other. But more important is the way that the speculative identity between relativism and absolutism can

be expressed as internal to relativism: relativism denotes an attitude toward absolutes. Far from negating or even taking issue with these absolutes, relativism requires the acceptance of particularized convictions, the acknowledgement that each is entitled to her own beliefs and opinions. Differing positions or beliefs are not to be engaged, compared, analyzed or brought into critical dialogue with one another. Rather, they are to be accepted as wholes, as essences, unique to the self-identity of another. Today, then, absolute conviction appears in and through relativism. Relativism encourages certainty in one's own convictions *precisely because* it accepts that others have their own convictions: *my convictions make me who I am*.

Given the rich variability in "evil's" discursive habitats, the multiple registers in which it thrives, determining the fields of reference informing a specific invocation of "evil" is difficult, potentially unending. Much easier is the registration of affect: an invocation of "evil" expresses an intensity of judgment and belief. The efficacy or weight of the term "evil" thus shifts from the signified to the signifying subject. The subject is convinced, certain; he knows the truth; he feels it deep in his soul. Moreover, as hearers join the speaker in filling in "evil" with content, they become invested in the struggle against "evil": insofar as they have suppressed uncertainties and installed their own unacknowledged fantasy of evil into the empty place the term occupies they identify all the more deeply, libidinally, with the battle against it. "Evil" might thus be usefully analogized to "obscenity" in first amendment jurisprudence: giving a clear, principled, definition of obscenity is too difficult; nevertheless, "we know it when we see it". The emphasis shifts from the object to those who know, to those brave and forthright enough to look evil in the face. Were the terms "obscenity" and "evil" clear and unambiguous, using them, applying them to their proper objects, would be no great feat. In the US of George W. Bush, as in the US of Ronald Reagan, this shift of the efficacy of the term "evil" from its object to the signifying subject suggests will, courage, and faith; indeed, it points to the resolve and conviction of a subject who knows.

As the retrospective of "evil" in presidential speeches attests, Reagan's invocation of evil differs markedly from that of his predecessors as evil becomes an ontological fact. Ontological evil permeates the world, establishing the conditions of existence even as its specificity as an attribute or judgment remains elusive. This elusiveness, in turn, reflects on the moral character of the one willing to confront the truth of evil. Likewise, Bush's invocation of an "axis-of-evil"

doesn't say anything about Iran, North Korea, or Iraq. It doesn't even say something about September 11th. Rather, it says something about Bush—that he is a man of conviction that he is certain, that he knows. Armed with certainty, he is empowered to fight evil in all its myriad, shifting, evolving forms, fighting it as possibility, as potential, fighting it before its pernicious effects can even be felt. In the face of Bush's knowledge of ontological evil, reasons are at best signs of weakness, of a lapse in certainty. At worst, they are hosts for pernicious evil, a mutant form in which evil hides.

NOTES

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1. David Frum recounts the process through which Bush's speech was written, highlighting the thinking that went into his adoption of the term "axis of hatred" and Bush's chief speech writer, Michael Gerson's, substitution of "evil" for "hatred". See *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Random House, 2003) 231-239.

2. My theorization here is informed by Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hegel. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a political factor* (London: Verso, 1991) 33-46 and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999) 88-89.

3. Susan Friend Harding writes, "Fundamentalists, and born-again Christians generally, do not simply *believe*, they *know*, that the Bible is true and is still coming true, that God speaks to them, and that Jesus dies so that they may live", *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 272. In using the terms "believe" and "know", I am following Slavoj Žižek's account of Lacan's *subject-supposed-to-know and subject-supposed-to-believe*. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 106-109.

4. I am not saying that those who heard Bush's speech necessarily agreed with him. That resolve championed by conservatives was heavily criticized by more moderate, less unilateral voices. Rather, my aim is to account of the conditions of possibility for the use of a specific phrase. I am attempting to make explicit or bring to the fore the differing and likely contradictory suppositions that could underlie the sense of White House speech writers, administration officials, and political pundits that such a phrase would capture the moment, accomplish their goals, or resonate in powerful ways.

5. See, for example, Jay Nordlinger, "Ashcroft with Horns", *National Review Online* (July 24, 2002).

6. For an account that emphasizes the loss of a sense and language of evil, see Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

7. See, for example, Stanley Kurtz, "Postmodernism Kills", *National Review* (August, 12, 2002). Available at National Review Online. Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, insists not only that "postmodernism can kill you", but also that postmodern professors believe "that American is an **evil** imperialist power which it would be immoral to aid in any way". Emphasis in original.
8. From the standpoint of the hawks in the Bush administration, the link between these regimes is clear: they are rogue regimes bent on developing weapons of mass destruction. These are the three regimes Condelezza Rice identifies as rogues and threats to US interests in "Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs* 79, 1 (January/February 2000) 45-62. There she urges the United States to mobilize whatever resources it can to remove Saddam Hussein. And, she refers to North Korea as the "evil twin of a successful regime just across its border" (60). Analyzing the first Gulf War, Michael J. Shapiro points out the use of the term "weapons of mass destruction" as enabling "a geopolitical category that is aimed at saving our identity-affirming cartography". See *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 104. Clearly, WMDs function in Rice's essays as the content enabling the category "rogue regime" and secure as the well the imaginary moral geography of the "axis of evil".
9. Survey results from the "The 2004 Political Landscape", Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, released November 5, 2003 and available at *http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=762*
10. One who would and does deny the political impact of the religious right is Ann Coulter, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002). Coulter argues that the religious right is a "mythical enemy" created by liberals "to justify their own viciousness and advance their agenda" (211). "Loathing of the religious right has become an end in itself", she writes, "a consuming passion. Liberals denounce Christian conservatives for being moralistic, for imposing their morality on others, for not separating morality from politics, and for bringing religious zeal to public life—and then work themselves into a frothing frenzy of righteous, moralistic zeal over their own moral excellence for being so rational, calm, and detached" (247).
11. Some of the best studies in this large and fascinating field include Paul Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross: Adorno and Christian Right Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) and Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*.
12. John F. Baugh, *The Battle for Baptist Integrity* (Austin, Texas: Battle for Baptist Integrity, Inc., no date). Copies may be requested by fax (512) 327-0944.
13. Frum, 238.
14. Howard Fineman, "Bush and God", *Newsweek* (March 10, 2003) vol. 141, no. 10, pp. 22ff.
15. See also Jane Bennett's and Michael Shapiro's introduction to *The Politics of Moralizing* (New York: Routledge, 2002). They write: "The diagnosis of moral depletion—defined as a loss of shared values—makes the most sense in relation to an ideal of cultural life as an organic whole whose parts tend toward a state of equilibrium", 2.
16. Thus, Susan Neiman powerfully rereads the history of continental philosophy as a struggle with the reality of evil in the world. See her *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
17. See Žižek's discussion in *Ticklish Subject*, 290-297.
18. For the rejection of the "repressive hypothesis" with regard to sexuality, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990) esp. ch. 2.
19. See, for example, Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). This collection of short pieces on evil is less an investigation than a set of lists, reflections, and narratives of pain and horror to establish the permanence of evil and

the importance of recognizing "evil for what it is" (13). A typical claim is: "Evil is the most powerful word in the language, and the most elusive" (7).
20. Lance Morrow, "The Real Meaning of Evil", *Time* (February 24, 2003) 74.
21. For an account of performative contradictions see, Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990) esp. 79-92. For a discussion of the symptom as "a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation", see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 21.
22. Frum, 231.
23. Delivered on January 28, 2003 and available at *www.whitehouse.gov*
24. Bennett and Shapiro, 4.
25. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). I'm indebted to Lee Quinby for drawing my attention to this text as well as to the overarching importance of apocalyptic rhetoric in political oratory.
26. Roosevelt's inaugural address is available at *www.bartleby.com/124/pres49.html* All presidential inaugural addresses can be found at *www.bartleby.com/124*
27. This speech is available in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations Volume II: Since 1914* (fifth edition), edited by Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Patterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) 220-222.
28. In Merrill and Patterson, 221.
29. Harry S. Truman, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 8, 1951." Available at *www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/tap/1851.html*, 2.
30. Available at *www.bartleby.com/124/pres54.html*
31. Frum relates that Bush hung a portrait of Eisenhower in the Cabinet Room and placed a bust of him in the Oval Office. "Why Ike? It might have been Bush's way of reminding his critics that he was not the first president to be ridiculed for his mangled syntax. But I think there was something more to Bush's choice: Eisenhower represented the kind of president that Bush wanted to be—a leader above party, a leader who drew his power from personal authority", 53-54.
32. See, respectively, "Commencement Address at American University", June 10, 1963 and "Remarks in the Rudolph Wilde Platz", West Berlin, June 26, 1963. Both are available at *www.kennedylibrary.org*
33. "Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty", July 26, 1963. Available at *www.kennedylibrary.org*
34. "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress", November 27, 1963. Available at *www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/selected_speeches.asp*
35. See his "Commencement Address at Howard University: To Fulfill These Rights", June 4, 1965. Available at *www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp*
36. Nixon's First Inaugural Address was delivered on January 20, 1969 and is available at *www.nixonfoundation.org/Research_Center/Nixons/Speeches_and_Quotes.shtml* Predictably cynical comments at this point might run with the idea of listening to suggest that this was how Nixon was able to hear the "silent majority" or this was why Nixon was so enthusiastic about wire-tapping.
37. Ford's address is available at *www.ford.utexas.edu/library/speeches/760019.htm*
38. See the speeches collected at *www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches*
39. See, for example, Reagan's "Remarks on Rewarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to the Late Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington", June 26, 1984. Reagan observes, "Henry Jackson understood that there is great good in the world and great evil, too, that there are saints and sinners among us. He had no illusions about totalitarians, but his understanding of the existence of evil didn't sour or dishearten him. He had

a great hope and great faith in America". Available at *www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1984/62684c.htm*

40. Asking, whether freedom must "wither in a quiet deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil", Reagan, in a June 1982 speech before the British House of a Commons, invokes a moral struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Available at *http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/rr40/speeches/empire.htm* The "evil empire" speech is available at *www.luminet.net/~tgort/empire.htm* The speech was widely criticized for its apocalypticism, primitivism, and its outrageous admixing of religion and politics. For a collection (ironically compiled) of these criticisms, see Mark Cunning, "Another Reagan Gaffe", *National Review* 43, 20 (November 4, 1991) 45.

41. In a radio address given during Easter, three years after the "evil empire" speech, Reagan notes that few commentators properly contextualized his point about opposing totalitarian and communist dictators. Reagan explains that he had been talking about America's own spiritual problems and its legacy of evil with respect to racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of intolerance. See "Radio Address to the Nation on International Violence and Democratic Values", March 29, 1986. Available at *www.reagan.utexas.edu/resources/speeches/1986/3298a*

42. "Interview with Henry Brandon of the *London Sunday Times* and *News Service on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues*", March 18, 1983. Available *at www.reagan.utexas.edu/resources/speeches/1983/31883e* **43.** "Democracy's Next Battle", Oxford Union Society Address by Ronald Reagan, December 4, 1992. I was unable to find a copy of this speech online. The Reagan Library, however, kindly faxed me a copy. Their phone number is (800) 410-8354. I'm indebted to Desiree Harvey for her diligence in securing this text. See also "Reagan: 'Evil Still Stalks the Planet'", the *Washington Post* (Dec 5, 1992) a19.

44. For a thorough engagement with the idea of the loss of the political or the post-political environment of contemporary communicative capitalism, see Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, esp. ch. 4.

45. Fineman, 24.

46. Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 248. See also my discussion in *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) ch. 4.

47. Frank Bruni, *Ambling into History: The Unlikely Odyssey of George W. Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 32.

48. Bruni, 88.

49. Bruni, 87.

50. Frum, 273-274. See also Bruni, 239-243.

51. For a compelling analysis of the Biblical sources of Bush's rhetoric (an analysis that usefully compares Bush's language to Osama bin Laden's), see Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). I'm indebted to Susan Henking for bringing this book to my attention.

52. Frum, 148.

53. Bruni, 255.

54. George W. Bush's speech to a joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001 is available at *http://www.luminet.net/~tgort/gwb092001.htm*

55. "Terror Coverage Boosts News Media's Images", Pew Research Center for People and the Press, survey report released November 28, 2001. Available at *http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=14*

56. Žižek, Plague of Fantasies, 63.

57. "Powell, Rice defend Bush's 'axis of evil' speech", CNN.com (February 18, 2002). Available at *www.cnn.com/2002/US/02/17/bush.axis*